Toaru Majutsu no Index 8

This is where all the female students of Academy City concentrate their gazes of envy on, the prestigious all-girls Tokiwadai Middle School. Certainly, all the students that attend this school are “ojous”.

One of the “ojous”, Misaka Mikoto, was just about to head to the shower to wash the sweat off herself after her physical education lessons, when the voice of a young girl could be heard from nearby.

Shirai Kuroko. A member of the group “Judgement” that maintains the order within Academy city, is a young lady with the Level 4 ability of Teleportation. She was planning to invite Mikoto to go shopping with her.

—That is how a long, long day would start for Kuroko. A long, long day where she learns the truth about her “onee-sama”, Misaka Mikoto...

When the “onee-sama” crosses paths with “that gentleman over there”, would the story of Shirai Kuroko thus begin!?



か-12-8

とある魔術の禁書目録⑧

鎌池和馬

電撃文庫
¥530

9784840232692

1920193005301

ISBN4-8402-3269-5

C0193 ¥530E

MediaWorks

Published by MediaWorks

Recommended Retail Price: 530 JPY

*Consumption levy would be added to the price separately



Kamachi Kazuma

Number 8 it is. The protagonist is faraway as usual. With the exception of that, I was thinking about telling a lively story on tackling the resolutions to the incidents of the many regular characters. But I am happy on how the interpersonal relations between a small number of the characters just slip by one another.

(Products of Dengeki Bunko)

Toaru Majutsu no Index
Toaru Majutsu no Index 2
Toaru Majutsu no Index 3
Toaru Majutsu no Index 4
Toaru Majutsu no Index 5
Toaru Majutsu no Index 6
Toaru Majutsu no Index 7
Toaru Majutsu no Index 8

Illustrator: Haimura Kiyotaka

Born in 1973. Managed to purchase a HDD Recorder at last. And the proportions of the recordings are: 30% Movies, 10% Tokusatsu and 60% Anime. With these, can one too be a prominent otaku?

カバー／暁印刷


とある魔術の
禁書目録
8
鎌池和馬
イラスト／灰村キヨタカ



“Aah, how careless! My ribbon landed inside onee-sama’s prohibited area!”

Student of Tokiwadai Middle School in Academy City — **Shirai Kuroko**


"..."
Kuroko's roommate — Misaka Mikoto
"That anthropoid!
Gaaaah!!"


"Umm. After calm consideration, it's definitely not a situation where Shirai-san is really needed."
Member of Judgment 177th Branch — Uiharu Kazari


“If you are able to make your way until here, I might become a good friend of yours, alright?”
2nd year student of Kirigaoka Girls’ Academy in Academy City — Musujime Awaki


“Fuwa!? says Misaka as Misaka is shocked by the sudden attack!”
Serial number 20001 of the Sisters — Last Order
“Thanks for that. To show my gratitude, here’s the shower at your face.”
Academy City’s strongest Level 5 — Accelerator


"Eh? Touma, I wonder who would be here at this hour?"
Nun and keeper of the Index of Prohibited Books — Index
"Owwwwwwwww!!"
High school student of Academy City — Kamijou Touma
"Misaka has a request, says Misaka as she looks straight at you and speaks out her mind."
Serial number 10032 of the Sisters — Misaka Imouto

contents

10 Prologue One of Five Fingers A_TOKIWA-DAI's_World.

20 Chapter 1 After School of Girls After_School_of_Angels.

54 Chapter 2 Girls Facing Off Space_and_Point.

102 Chapter 3 Hiding Lit Debris "Remnant"

156 Chapter 4 The Judger Break_or_Crash?

234 Epilogue Every Single Day One_Place,One_Scene.



TOARU MAJUTSU NO INDEX

とある魔術の禁書目録

インデックス

8

KAMACHI KAZUMA

鎌池和馬

イラスト・灰村キヨタカ

HAIMURA KIYOTAKA

デザイン・渡邊宏一

PROLOGUE

One of Five Fingers.

A_TOKIWA-DAI's_World.

Tokiwadai Middle School.

It was one of the premier schools in Academy City, which occupied one-third of Tokyo, and a place where esper powers were developed. It was also the world's most elite girls' school. Conditions to enter the school were so tough that the school once rejected an imperial daughter mercilessly, creating international strife as a result.

The school shared its ground with the four other noble girls' schools adjacent to it. It wasn't because there wasn't enough land; rather, it was to create a more stable security system through joint venturing.

Those areas were collectively known as the School Garden, and the area it occupied was more than fifteen times the size of an ordinary school. Even so, it didn't give the feeling that the place was huge. Besides the experimental facilities that were required for the large number of special lessons, many crafting and shopping facilities were crammed in there as well; it was because all the esper powers development equipment was developed there and was not sold to the outside world to prevent the top-secret technology from being leaked out. The view of each facility was Western, and as a whole, the place looked like a Mediterranean town. Even the road signs and traffic light designed in the School Garden were different from the outside world.

"This stone road and marble building… what a waste of space."

September 14. Though it was the end of summer, it was still extremely hot. The twin-pigtailed girl, Shirai Kuroko was wearing an athletic sleeveless shirt and shorts, looking far away, standing in the middle of the campus in that hot afternoon, and grumbling as if she couldn't stand the weather.

The surface of the school grounds were made of stone, like that of the plaza in front the Great Britain Museum. However, the difference was that even professional surveyors wouldn't be able to detect the slightest bump or tilt on the stone surface. Also, the material wasn't any ordinary stone. Even though it was hard to tell with the naked eye, if one were to put that material under a microscope, they'd discover that it was specially made by Academy City.

On that smooth and flat ground of the school campus, there was not even a speck of dust.

There was not even any of the white chalk on the ground that was normally used for drawing lines during PE programs.

It was currently lesson time, and the school was undergoing its esper power examinations, but the lines on the ground weren't drawn out with chalk.

The lines were made of light. Buried underneath the school grounds were millions of microfibers. By concentrating the light released by those fiber optic points, one could create different lights. It was similar to how an electronic bulletin worked.

The lights centered on Shirai, with a circle around her. With another smaller circle inside the circle, a large fan shape was made out.

It looked like the lines used in a shot put competition, but the angle of this fan was a lot narrower.

There were many of that same shape on the ground. Next to Shirai was another girl clad in PE attire. The place felt like a batting range.

Shirai's ability was called "Teleport". Basically, she could teleport anything she touched (including herself) by ignoring the three dimensions, and send it far away. However, she could only teleport things that she could touch.

The Level of teleportation was dependent on three factors: the size of the object, the distance, and the accuracy. One of the methods of testing was similar to a shot put contest, but this test required both distance and accuracy.

In Tokiwadai Middle School, Shirai was the only teleporter. The girls standing beside her were different, as they had "firing"-type powers.

A sound echoed as something landed in a far corner of Shirai's vision.

It was the bag that she had teleported away using her ability. It was filled with sand, weighing 120 kilograms.

A short while later, words of light appeared beside Shirai's feet.

"Record: 78 meters, 23 centimeters. Error from designated distance: 54 centimeters. Final score: 5."

After seeing those words, the girl sighed, and slowly shook her head, her twin pigtails swinging left and right.

“Ugh… The score’s really terrible… so bad that I can’t even express it in Japanese. I’m extremely weak at shifting big and heavy stuff far away. If it’s within fifty meters, the margin of error would be within millimeters.”

The limits of Shirai’s ability were “81.5 meters of distance, and a mass of 130.7 kilograms”. However, the distance was completely unrelated to size; she couldn’t shift the item further just because it was smaller. Also, once she nearly reached her limit, no matter how light the object was, her accuracy would decrease.

Additionally, the strength of her powers depended on her mental condition as well. The conditions for the test just now required her to use the limit of her powers, and since the weather was so hot, her accuracy would drop by a lot.

(Always trying to find an excuse for myself, it’s no wonder that I can’t become a Level 5,) Shirai considered, mocking herself as she sighed heavily.

At that moment, a laugh of ridicule came from the shot put arena beside her.

“Hohoho, Shirai-san, why be so petty about this and get your emotions carried away by the numbers on the machine? Don’t tell me you can’t set a more precise goal for yourself…? Hoho…”

Shirai turned around irritatedly.

The girl walked in front of her. She had silky yet unnatural hair, and she was wearing the same PE vest and shorts as Shirai, yet she was holding an ornate fan, using it to hide her mouth as she snickered. She was older than Shirai Kuroko by one year (the type of courses that the students choose wasn’t dependent on year), and her name was Kongou Mitsuko.

Kongou Mitsuko was a Level 4 Aero Hand. She was capable of creating a wind injection point on the object, causing the object to fly out like a bullet. She was truly a terrifying shooter girl.

“…The real petty one is the one who continues to snicker at other people’s frustrations and doesn’t bother enough to try to hide it,” Shirai said as she shook her head to a side.

“Ho, as expected of someone who missed by 54 centimeters, your speech pattern is limited. Oh, yeah, Shirai-san, recently, I noticed that your ability has the weakness of… Oh, my, ignoring me? Shirai-san, I’m giving you some comfortable wind, so hurry and turn around.”

Kongou swung her fan at Shirai, and Shirai unhappily turned her head around. Kongou seemed to be delighted as she continued to fan. The wind seemed to carry a bit of an aroma.

“Back to the original topic; the limitation of your ability is probably that you tried to calculate the space that you didn’t have to handle in the first place. It might be better for you if you streamline your calculations.”

“…Thanks for your concern, but the manipulation of three dimensions is different from that of eleven.”

“Don’t mind it; this care I’m providing for you is only the beginning. Recently, I’ve been thinking about creating a clique, and I hope that if you have time, you would join, and if you don’t, that you would try to find some way to get it. How about it? Just treat it as some sort of literary club and come take a look? Observing how others control their powers, you might be able to get some inspiration.”

“Um…”

Shirai frowned.

A clique.

The word sounded rather scary. In reality, it was just an organization that functioned like a club.

However, this was Tokiwadai Middle School. In that school that followed the philosophy of “creating world-class talents through education”, there were numerous students who had established themselves in their areas of research during their school days.

For a group of students with similar goals to gather in school, to request for facilities and funding from the school’s board of directors, and to finally strike it big in a national event… Just by that definition alone, maybe a clique wasn’t that much different from a school’s social club.

Larger cliques would get more contacts, funding, and inside information, so most of those outstanding students in their areas of specialties had a clique backing them.

Of course, there were students who firmly choose not to join a clique and did everything on their own, but it was much easier to borrow equipment and get financial assistance from the school if they requested it as a clique. The bigger cliques in terms of numbers and grades would have more prestige and power in the school. That element of its activities made it not much different from an ordinary social club.

In other words, a larger clique would have more power. That power was also influential even outside school. Being among the largest ten cliques would help a student’s qualifications. As for the creator of the clique, their name would be extremely famous.

Also, the members of the clique weren't just powerful espers who had more firepower than pistols; they were also noble daughters from all over the world. For such a group of people to gather together, it was a much simpler and clearer "power". It was dangerous enough if one used their own power, so if it was an entire clique, one could imagine how devastating the destruction would be.

So…

"I advise you to forget about it, Kongou-san. If you're going to establish a clique, it'll most likely get destroyed within two minutes."

"What…?"

"Do you not understand? Even if you are able to create a powerful clique it would have been long destroyed by other cliques. You're still living happily, and this is the best evidence of the difference in power."

"No… there's no such thing! With… with the status of the Kongou family, and with my own power, no other clique shall stand before…"

Kongou Mitsuko's face was flushed red as she started to refute that, but her face became extremely pale.

That was because a sudden explosion shook the school buildings, sports hall, garden, and everything on the ground.

There was a swimming pool behind the school. However, it was blocked by the building itself, so it was impossible to see it from there.

The explosion had come from the swimming pool.

Wasn't the school building supposed to be in-between? The condensed mist still landed on Kongou's hot face. The heat was removed from her face. The terrifying explosion had actually caused the water from the swimming pool to fly over there.

"…That… What's going on…?"

Her face littered with water droplets, Kongou was stunned, her entire body trembling, as if someone had spit on her face. She touched her face, and then turned to look at the school.

"Oh, yeah, you only transferred in during the second semester, so you might not know this. But that's the Ace of Tokiwadai."

Hearing that sentence, Kongou remembered.

There should be a girl standing at the swimming pool behind the school.

That girl's power should be classified as a "long-range" type, similar to Shirai's and Kongou's. However, as the destructive power was too great, they couldn't test it using conventional methods. So, the teachers of Tokiwadai got headaches over it.

The school prepared a specially designed course for her. If they didn't weaken the power with the water of the swimming pool, forget about the test equipment; it was probable that the entire school could be destroyed. She was one of the only two Level 5s in Tokiwadai Middle School.

The Railgun, Misaka Mikoto.

She was not aligned to any clique, and treated everyone as equal.

Shirai Kuroko was thinking about the onee-sama that she had admired for a long time as she said, "Kongou-san, have you come to your realization, and also, are you prepared to face such a terrifying attack?"

It wasn't a statement that had any hidden meaning behind it.

Kongou Mitsuko's face was still green with shock, as she couldn't utter a single reply.

"As the leader of a clique, you will definitely gain quite a lot of influence in Tokiwadai Middle School. However, if the reason for you to set up your own clique is to satisfy your own pride, Onee-sama will come over and stop you, won't she?"

The moment Shirai finished speaking, another explosion could be heard, as if everything was timed.

CHAPTER 1

After School of Girls.

After_School_of_Angels.

Part 1

"Such things happened just now, Onee-sama."

There were three bathing facilities in Tokiwadai Middle School.

One of them was a shower room that was a subsidiary of the school. It was called the Returning Bath Facility, and it was a place built exclusively for students to tidy themselves up. The bathhouse was filled with white steam.

Shirai said that as she poured the suitably warm water on her body. The water flowed down her delicate skin, pushing the soap bubbles on her breasts down to her abdomen.

"Ah, the water splashed all the way to where you were? Is there anything to really fuss about with that degree of power? I tried my best to control myself. If I had used my full power, not even the swimming pool would be enough to block it," Mikoto said from the other side of the partition dryly.

The bathroom was about the size of five classrooms, and there were close to ninety showerheads. Each of them was separated by white partition boards and a sliding door. The door wasn't as big as the boards. Considering the height of an ordinary female middle school student, it could probably only hide all the way from the thighs to the chest. If the girl was too tall, she wouldn't be able to fit the regulations, and had to bend her body down in order to prevent exposing herself.

"Besides, if I want to stop, I would try to use a peaceful way to settle it. This isn't something major as well, and I know how to choose my attacks based on who the opponent is. The only person who I can use my full power on is that idiot."

The sense of comfort revealed in the last sentence made Shirai's eyebrows tremble. The soap bubbles flowing down from her abdomen to her thighs brought a sense of itchiness.

(That idiot again, for Onee-sama to mention him again…)

One of Shirai's eyebrows continued to twitch as she reached her hand out for the top of the sliding door. That was where she hung the hairbands she normally used to tie her twin pigtails.

Shirai placed one of the bands on the ground. As warm water from the showerhead had accumulated on the white marble floor, once the hairband landed on the floor, it followed the shallow water flow, and drifted into the neighboring bathing room through the gap.

"Ahhh, I'm really careless! To think that I let the hairband flow into Onee-sama's forbidden area!"

"Stop using that as an excuse to use your teleportation to come over here!"

Shirai was really thinking of using her teleportation, but Mikoto just shouted and slammed hard against the partition. The other girls in the bathhouse, who were busy chatting about, were terrified by that sound, and stopped their conversations.

Because of the noise disturbance, Shirai's teleportation failed. When she used her teleportation, she had to define the three dimensions by using the theory of the eleventh dimension, and use the resulting values to recalculate and redefine them. The process was extremely complicated, and it sometimes failed due to sudden anxiety or surprise.

"Hoho, this seemed to have been a well-prepared way to counter it, and proves that Onee-sama's thought process and my own are completely in sync. Ho… hohoho!"

"I don't want to play this sort of mind game with you… Take your hairband back."

Mikoto's wet yet delicate hand extended over from the other side of the partition, the wet hairband dangling from her fingertips. Shirai thanked Mikoto, received the thin hairband, and felt the slightly warm air coming from it.

Shirai felt her body from top to bottom, removing the remaining soap bubbles, and turned off the showerhead.

"Oh, yeah, Onee-sama, do you have any plans after school?"

Shirai said that as she turned to the partition wall beside her. The water that was flowing down from her clavicle to her chest was flung away.

"Yeah, I do have the plan to sleep throughout the year."

Mikoto casually replied, and at the same time, a clanking sound could be heard. She seemed to be rummaging through her shower bag, looking for a small bottle of shampoo.

“If that’s not a joke, I could take the chance when you’re sleeping…”

“Stop sighing and saying this so seriously; I’m getting goosebumps. Is there anything for me after school?”

On the other side of the partition, the sound of soap being squeezed out of a sponge could be heard, together with the sweet scent of the shampoo. After that, Mikoto seemed to have turned up the water level, as the showerhead made an even louder sound.

“It’s not really urgent.”

Shirai leaned her back against the partition wall.

“However… about that… I just thought about going out with Onee-sama to buy something, eat some cake. Recently, Judgment’s work has increased, so I had no time to go out with Onee-sama. To be honest, I’m a little bored. Also, didn’t Onee-sama say that she wanted to buy something?”

“Kuroko…”

The voice from the other side of the partition wall became somewhat gentle.

(Go… go for it! Today, Kuroko won’t back down so easily! I know that Onee-sama cares for Kuroko even though she’s stubborn, and fawn in her arms, hoho… hehahahahaha—!)

Shirai Kuroko stealthily revealed a lecherous smile, and as the partition blocked her, Mikoto was completely in the dark, and only said gently to her kouhai.

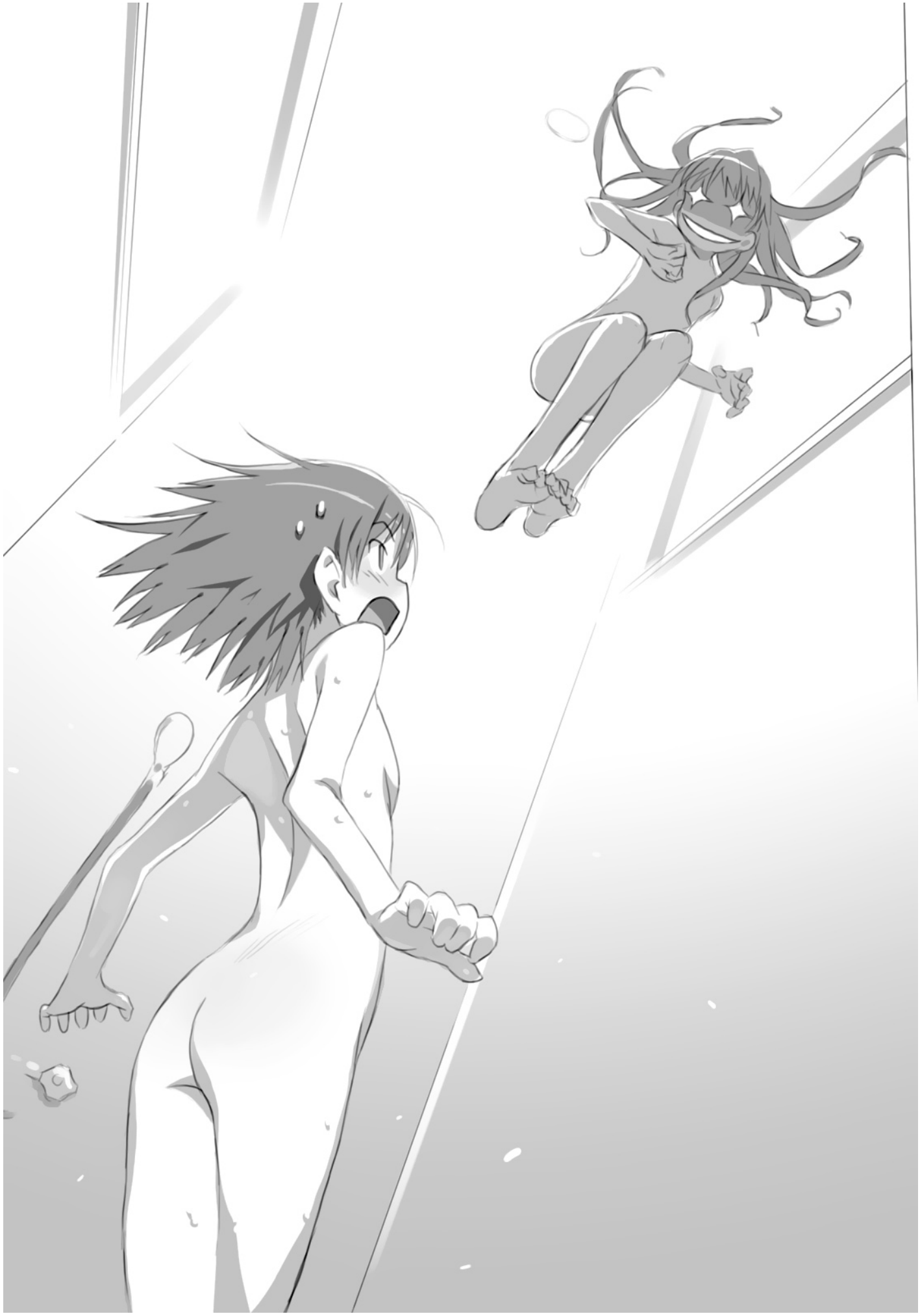
“You always run off to the sweets shop to heavily indulge every time after your Judgment work; no wonder your little belly won’t disappear no matter how much you diet.”

A second later.

With a lecherous smile, Shirai Kuroko teleported over to where Misaka Mikoto was.

More accurately, she was directly above her.

As a woman, she knew she would lose, but she had to give the opponent a kick that could send her flying back.



Part 2

The School Garden, which was made of five schools, was a mini-city.

(Maybe it's like an American naval base stationed in Japan?) Shirai considered.

Of course, that comparison may have seemed weird, but there was a large barricade that prevented other people from entering. The barricade was separated into different areas, such as experimental facilities and housing areas. Even the shops that provided the daily necessities, such as a café or a clothes shop, were available.

Shirai and Mikoto were walking in that city that had everything.

Though it was a sealed place surrounded by a barricade, there were still public buses driven by female drivers. The crowds of people moving around were wearing different kinds of uniforms, five in total, and looking at them, they were all young girls, which was inexplicable.

The School Garden with its stone walkways and white buildings looked like an old town located near the Mediterranean Sea. The buildings had a Western feel, but they were rectangular, as if the triangular roofs had been forcefully torn down by someone—a unique building design exclusive for those areas with little rain. Though the buildings there were modern, there was a tinge of an ancient feeling imbued in them.

However, compared to the scene of a Western street, there were two things lacking in the School Garden.

Firstly, a church.

Secondly, sculptures of great humans.

There should be no need for explanation on the first part. As for the second part, as most of the sculptures were religious greats or saints, one couldn't see them there.

The Western street that had neither of those things seemed really weird because most of the cities in the West had expanded from a religious site or square.

Over here, what replaced it was a school.

If there was a bird's eye view, one could see everything clearly. Numerous roads expanded from the five schools like a spider web. Those five spider webs intertwined with each other, forming numerous cross junctions in the process.

In other words, the roads in the School Garden were rather narrow. That was the result of building so many experimental facilities in limited land space, and it made moving along them feel like a maze.

And right now, after school, on that wonderful street, two girls were walking side by side.

Shirai Kuroko and Misaka Mikoto.

As the idols of all the girls in Academy City and rich girls of Tokiwadai Middle School, the duo's hair was rather messy. That, of course, was the result of a large-scale battle.

Mikoto tiredly combed her hair with a comb in her hand and said, "...No matter what, isn't it too much to send a flying kick to the face while nude? I saw what I shouldn't be seeing clearly; that nearly scared me to death."

"Hohoho, I expected that, Onee-sama. To fight head-on with the strongest Electromaster is definitely stupid, but in the bathhouse, where there's water everywhere, Onee-sama wouldn't want others to get involved, so she won't use her electricity. My only miscalculation was that Onee-sama's unarmed combat is so vicious."

Shirai gave a wry smile, as if she had given up. Such a sight wasn't suited for a student of Tokiwadai Middle School, which had the mission of "creating world-class talents through education".

After that, Shirai laughed, and lashed her shriveled bag. She seemed to have regained her spirit.

Mikoto looked tired as she said to Shirai, "Come to think of it, you really intend to lose weight?"

"Why can Onee-sama not treat dieting as anything significant yet still maintain such a perfect body? Don't tell me that you mastered a way to use the electricity in your body to burn off the fats—?!"

"There's no such thing, and stop looking at me with such a fierce expression... That's enough! Didn't I say that there's no such thing? Stop shaking my shoulders! I understand your feelings, but doesn't our school forbid students from dieting?"

Over dieting would prevent the students from developing properly, and that included their esper powers. Thus, some schools forbade their students from doing that.

On hearing that, Shirai stopped rummaging through her bag and sighed.

"Though powers are important, is there really a need to sacrifice a girl's happiness for the sake of powers? I don't want to become a person stacked with fats teleporting all over the place."

"However, I heard that when dieting, the part that's reduced first is the fat on the breasts. Also, if you over diet, your skin will lose its fat, and will become dry and rough. Your hair will also end up lacking nutrients and fall off easily."

“Ahhhh—! I don’t want to listen to such health trivia that will distraught me!!”

Shirai covered her ears and shook her head hard.

If it were any other place in Academy City, such an action would be seen as weird. But right now, when girls overheard the duo’s conversation, they’d also felt the same thing and wouldn’t look at her strangely. A girl who was about to put a french fry into her mouth revealed a stiff smile, and put the fry back into the packaging.

Shirai thought that even if it was Mikoto, she probably wouldn’t talk about such things like weight or cosmetics. Though she did keep an aloof look, she would still mind other boys staring at her. However, being in the School Garden wasn’t really different from being in a girls’ school, so they could say whatever they wanted.

The two of them walked through the artificially created Western atmosphere.

There were no large shops like department stores or shopping malls in the School Garden. All the items required for lessons or school life, like PE attire and stationery, had their own stores. Thus, the streets were filled with mini-stores that specialized in selling certain items. As for some of the large buildings, they belonged to the experimental companies.

Like a trail in a maze, there were shopping streets everywhere.

Shirai saw the brand of a certain shop, pulled Mikoto’s hand, and walked into the shop.

Mikoto saw what was inside the shop, sighed, and said, “You came here for this?”

“Oh, my, yes; this is a daily necessity,” Shirai casually replied.

It was a lingerie shop.

It was a small yet intricate shop, the interior design was mainly made of wood, and the atmosphere felt like that of an antique shop or a gift shop. The orange sunset shined in through the window and, coupled with the lamp lights, created a soft light. One could see that the designer wanted to create a relaxed and peaceful atmosphere.

However, what was being displayed were women lingerie, all of different colors, with different lacings and patterns. It really didn’t match the calm atmosphere of the shop. Maybe it was a method to make their products stand out even more and give the customers a deeper impression of their goods?

“To be honest, I do feel that this place isn’t suitable for hanging out with friends. My choice of underwear being discovered isn’t such a good thing.”

“With our current relationship, there should be no need to consider this. Onee-sama likes pink and childish underwear; I’ve checked it thoroughly—Owowow! Stop pulling my ear, Onee-sama!”

"…Teleportation is truly a troublesome ability. Talk, Kuroko: where are you hiding every day when you see me changing?"

"This… this isn't important, right, Onee-sama? Don't I show my underwear to Onee-sama every day?"

"I didn't see that voluntarily! Who asked you to wear such transparent silk pajamas!? I'm guessing that you're letting me see it on purpose?!?!"

"My my, Onee-sama, I really feel that your fondness of pink kiddy loose pajamas is—Ayowow! Onee-sama, you want to be the queen this year- Owowow!"

Though Shirai was being pulled by the ear, she seemed happy.

The two of them continued to make a ruckus, but it didn't attract the attention of the bystanders. Besides the two of them, there were three students from other noble schools and an old granny shop owner and lace master who seemed to have sat at the counter for many years, but no one seemed to notice that they were causing a scene. The female shopkeeper continued to read her English newspapers. In the School Garden, where every student was a girl, that sort of ruckus was just par for the course.

"Ah, Onee-sama, that top and bottom combination over there seem to suit you."

"How can you still calmly recommend this when your ear is being pulled…? Eh! How do they even have that kind of 80% transparent laced underwear!? Is that used for comedy!?"

"This is a lingerie store, it's normal for them to sell such high class underwear."

"…It sounds like you're an expert or something like that."

"I'm an expert at making Onee-sama blush due to embarrassment—Owowow! Oh my, I seem to be more excited now. Hoho… hohoho. In this bright day, to be seen getting a part of my body being pulled by Onee-sama, it's another pleasure."

"Kuroko, if you keep at this, I'm going to pull your ear off, no?"

Mikoto smiled as she pulled Shirai's ear, but the cute look of Mikoto blushing and turning away when she had seen the underwear that Shirai had recommended didn't escape Shirai's eyes.

Shirai saw the side of Mikoto's embarrassed face and revealed a smile of happiness like never before.

Suddenly, Kuroko saw that Mikoto seemed to be shocked, staring seriously at something else.

"Eh?"

A suspicious Kuroko followed to where Mikoto was staring.

On the window that was beside the road, the world outside the window was already engulfed by the sunset. On the sky far away, an airship was floating slowing. There was a large screen below, and right now, the news was being aired on it.

The headlines could be seen from there: the Americans had successfully launched a space shuttle. Various images of the shuttle from different angles were being replayed on the screen.

Mikoto completely forgot about the underwear as she watched the news report seriously. That made Shirai, who was beside her, feel bored.

“There are a lot of them recently. Last week, it seems like France, Russia and Spain have launched theirs. This month, China and Pakistan are preparing to launch theirs as well. Our teachers would often mention this during the second economics lesson when talking about the pros and cons about the aeronautical development industry.”

Shirai said that as her finger touched Mikoto’s earlobe.

“Waa! Kuroko! What are you doing!?”

Mikoto frantically turned towards Shirai.

“That’s… that’s right, Academy City also launched one last week. Come to think of it, why did you choose such a useless course… Stop poking my ear… you… and stop petting me!”

Tokiwadai Middle School was known as an elite training institute, and the philosophy was to create world-class talents through education. Thus, their curriculum was different from ordinary middle schools.

“In the past, the multi-phase rockets and space shuttles required a large-scale firing area to be launched, so only a few countries or organizations had such funding and technology to use it. But now, times have changed… I have to hand in a report this week, so I checked up on some things…” Shirai said as she casually picked a black-laced top-bottom combination and tossed it to Mikoto.

“To be honest, I do feel that learning the third economics is useless, but since you’re handing in your report, I’ll tell you something. Right now, the latest technology is to place a rocket below a plane, and firing it directly in mid-air. Ever since such technology was developed, the number of rocket thresholds have decreased, so such things can’t be seen in old references. You have to be mindful of this when you’re collecting information.”

Mikoto’s expression didn’t change as she tossed the black-laced underwear back at Shirai, and sighed. After that, she seemed to be really interested in a pale yellow underwear.

“O-Onee-sama… isn’t that a little too childish?”

Mikoto unhappily glared at Shirai, but Shirai didn’t seem to back down. Mikoto seemed to have gotten some sort of signal from Shirai’s stiff expression, and could only turn to look at another set of underwear unhappily. But to Shirai, the other one was still rather childish-looking.

“Sigh… now that you mentioned it, once the basic information in the reference is edited, the entire information becomes hard to interpret, so troublesome. But I can’t just abandon all the old references. Besides, some information can only be obtained from the old references.”

“Isn’t judging the rights and wrongs of old and new information part of what we have to learn? Besides, if you take it all now, it’ll get complicated when the aeronautical development industry gets complicated, and would definitely mind-boggle you. Ever since the private sector merged in, the entire industry got bustling, not only are new records formed, the chronology is updated regul—Woah! Wait a sec, Kuroko! Isn’t that a little too…!”

Shirai was holding a set of underwear that had extremely low defense stats, so low that Mikoto was stunned.

“Ngh? Onee-sama, did you say something?”

“Eh… ne… never mind, everyone has their own underwear preferences. However, try not to get caught by the dorm supervisors or instructors.”

Mikoto avoided looking directly at the scary set of underwear in Shirai’s hand and adjusted her breathing.

“H-However, the situation right now is really troublesome. Those organizations who originally have a launch area don’t want the newcomers to come in and mess things up when the industry develops. The organizations with new technology however want to prove to the world that the new technology is much cheaper and safer than the old rockets and planes. Old and new technology, one side gets supported, the other side would lose ground. This is why everyone has been firing rockets into the air, to prove the reliability to their sponsors.”

Though Mikoto was trying her best not to look at the underwear in Shirai’s hand, she still couldn’t resist the urge to peek. She muttered, “Instead of wearing such things, you might as well not wear anything…”

“Hn? Why is Onee-sama trying not to look at me?” Shirai picked up several sets of underwear that she liked and said suspiciously, “Anyway, Academy City itself is an exception, it does have both old and new technology, so there’s no such problem. And with the Japanese government being the biggest sponsor, they should be feeling alright… ugh…”

Before Shirai finished speaking, she traced her lips with her fingers.

Her lips seemed to be cracked. On seeing that, Mikoto said, “Do you need some lip balm? The air in the shop is rather dry due to the air-conditioning.”

“No. It was already cracked yesterday.”

Basically, Tokiwadai Middle School forbade students from putting on makeup. And the rules were strict—forget about bright lipsticks or mascara, even practical items like lip balm and hand creams were forbidden.

So to them, using light makeup that could barely be seen had become a tradition. Only if one looked closely, could one see that Mikoto and Shirai’s lips were giving off a little glow and flavor.

However, it was a tactic of last resort, and yet now it had become a little trend that was occurring around Tokiwadai Middle School. Everyone even had a name for that ludicrously pompous method of make-up: “ladies’ ceremony”.

“Okay…” Mikoto rummaged through her bag and pulled out a stick-shaped lip balm and said, “We’ll be going to the pharmacy to buy some lip balm later, so you won’t mind using this one for a while, okay?”

“What!?”

Shirai Kuroko looked in astonishment as Mikoto casually pulled out an ordinary lip balm.

She widened her eyes, her whole body trembling.

(Lip…lip balm! O-Onee-sama’s…Onee-sama’s…Onee-sama’s lip balm that she used to rub over her precious lips! Ha…haaaa…Kuroko…haaa…Kuroko can’t take it anymore—!)

“Wait…wait a sec, why are you pulling the entire stick out? Time out! Time out! Kuroko, why are you opening your mouth so wide!? Are you going to eat it all up!?”

“Ah… too excited, I nearly ate it up…”

“I can guess what your mind is thinking, but this lip balm is sold in sets of three, so this one hasn’t been used yet. Ordinary people won’t even think about using lip balms that someone else has used before, right?”

“Eh… it wasn’t used before? Cheh… what a pity. Ah! But if I use it and then return it to Onee-sama…!”

“No need to return me that. There are three of them anyway, so it’s alright to give you one. Stop… stop it! Stop forcing that lip balm which you used before onto my lips!”

It was like Shirai and Mikoto were living in a Hollywood movie, as the good guy and bad guy skirmished around, fighting for the handgun. Suddenly, Mikoto froze.

Shirai discovered that Mikoto wasn't looking at her, but at something behind her.

She turned around, looking surprised.

Breast pads.

They were meant for girls to wear underneath their bras when they were not confident about their breasts, a gimmick meant to protect their pride and dignity. In reality, there were only girls in the School Garden—which meant that there was no one to seduce, so those things weren't very popular, and could only exude a sense of sadness due to the poor sales.

Shirai thought for a while, and remembered something.

Mikoto had mentioned just now as they were walking on the streets.

"—However, I heard that when dieting, the part that reduces first is the fat on the breasts."

"Haha, so Onee-sama is mindful about this? For a huge bust or slim figure, Onee-sama chooses the former?"

"Wha…"

Mikoto's expression immediately stiffened.

"No, that's not right… Onee-sama shouldn't be too mindful about the breasts. If so, this means that it is an abstract desire, like say, Onee-sama wants a mature adult's body, and not be treated as a child? Ah, Onee-sama is infatuated! Whom is the lucky man who made Onee-sama so persistent? It should be someone older than Onee-sama, right? Come to think of it, on the last day of summer vacation, didn't Onee-sama meet up with someone outside the dorm? That person didn't seem like a middle school student."

In that critical juncture, to make such a provocative statement.

Shirai was already prepared to be beaten up, such that she had even thought about the words she wanted to say after she was beaten up.

However…

The Level 5 of Academy City, commonly known as the Ace of Tokiwadai, Misaka Mikoto just blushed, lowered her head, and didn't say anything.

"Ah, eh? O–Onee-sama…?"

Shirai inadvertently turned pale. A certain boy's face appeared in Shirai's mind, regretting deeply in her own heart as she bit onto the handkerchief.

Just as Shirai was about to bite it to shreds, Mikoto finally snapped back and revealed a look of uninterest, yet glancing stealthily at the breast pads from the corner of her eyes, muttering, "Oh…to think that some people use this contraption". Though she was trying to look aloof, she was practically admitting her guilt.

"…So breasts pads come in different types and textures, huh? Wah, this is practically a balloon stuffed with fruit juice."

Though Shirai was greatly hurt by that huge interest of Mikoto, she couldn't bear to turn a deaf ear to Mikoto's words.

Shirai could only suppress her jealous feelings, sigh slightly, and say, "Hn, I heard that breasts enhancement surgery is just gel packaged inside plastic bags and stuffed inside the breasts. Maybe that might be more bouncy."

"Bouncy…? Ho… but the sizes may vary."

"Because everyone is different. Ah, will Onee-sama's cute breasts develop to that size after puberty?"

"Stop pointing! There are other customers here!"

Mikoto frantically pressed down Shirai's fingers, but her eyes had been attracted by the products that Shirai was pointing at.

As the observer, Shirai inadvertently sighed.

If it was even possible to stuff such large padding inside a bra, it was not strange for it to be exposed.

For a while, Mikoto seemed to have forgotten something as she observed the breasts pads in front of her.

After a while, Mikoto backed away, tilted her head, and said, "However, even if I'm to wear this, wouldn't I be exposed if I take off my clothes?"

"…! O-Onee-sama! Don't… don't tell me you thought about everything already!?"

"Ah? Eh? No… that's not it, Kuroko! I'm talking about PE! When I change my clothes!!"

Mikoto frantically denied it, but Shirai revealed a manga-like thunder shocked expression as she remained rooted to the spot.



Part 3

Academy City was engulfed in the sunset.

The buildings of the School Garden had white walls, and the atmosphere would change according to the color of the sky. The last bus was about to arrive soon, and the girls from five different schools, wearing their own set of uniforms, were heading towards the bus terminal. Like Shirai and Mikoto, their dormitories were outside the School Garden.

Though the school never decreed that the students had to take the public bus, these girls who were so pampered and isolated that they had a sense of fear against Academy City. Among them, there were also people who had never stepped anywhere else beside the dormitory, the bus, or the School Garden.

Among the noisy crowd that was heading home, Shirai and Mikoto were leisurely walking back.

They were not doing that voluntarily however, as they were unable to hasten their pace. The dried and shriveled bags in their hands swung around lifelessly.

“You… how many times must I tell you… I’m talking about changing before and after PE lessons… it… it has nothing to do… to do with someone I like… nothing at all…”

“I-I must reemphasize… undressing yourself in front of men… is a little too early…”

“Rahhhh—! It’s so hard to talk to some people who like to buy sleazy and revealing underwear!!”

“Sleazy… revealing!? O-Onee-sama’s trying to act cute by wearing such childish ones! As a fellow female, I cannot agree to that!!”

“What did you say!?”

“What!?”

Mikoto and Shirai continued to quarrel, but after quarrelling for so long, they were overwhelmed by their own fatigue. The duo finally sighed and relaxed.

They didn’t take the bus back, so they weren’t mindful about the timing of the last bus.

From the corner of her eyes, Shirai saw a shop closing as the students were heading home, and said, “Oh yeah, Onee-sama, we can argue about the truth later, where are we going right now? We spent too much time arguing. I originally intended for us to go somewhere to eat after we bought our stuff.”

“That’s right, we can settle this misunderstanding later. Isn’t it too late today? Especially since the shops in the School Garden close very early.”

“Ugh, but once we exit the School Garden, there are many shops that will be open at this time. Maybe we can go and order a dessert set from Black-honey Hall…”

“Ahhh, Kuroko, you normally can’t resist the temptation. No wonder some parts of your body are so… ugh!”

As Mikoto ridiculed Shirai, halfway she could feel a tremendous killing aura.

Shirai, who was beside her, lowered her head, hiding her expression, her mouth muttering something.

“Ku-Kuroko… I originally intend to add on ‘It’s alright to eat more as long as you exercise enough, however’…”

“Onee-sama, you’re really fond of saying such words that hurts a young girl’s heart. I might end up using my teleportation to remove your clothes in broad daylight, no?”

Shirai squirmed as she said that. Her esper power was practically the worst enemy to all the girls. As long as her hand touched it, no matter whether it was a skirt or underwear, it could be teleported somewhere else. In other words, whether Mikoto would end up fully or half-naked would depended on her.

Facing that impending danger, Mikoto couldn’t help but tremble in fear. Luckily, a phone rang, resolving the tense situation.

On hearing it, Mikoto knew that it was not hers.

“Kuroko… why do you always like to use such powerful multi-function phones that are impractical? Is there any significance in increasing the number of chords?”

“Heheheh, not only that. This phone has many disadvantages such as being small, easy to lose, hard to press buttons and a blurry screen.”

Shirai weakly laughed as she pulled out the phone.

Her phone’s design was completely different; it had a diameter of a meter and was a five-centimeter-long cylinder that looked like lipstick.

She pressed the top button, stopping the ringing, and from the side, pulled out a thin transparent paper-like substance. That was the main body of the phone.

“Looks so sci-fi, yet so hard to use. Looks really deceptive.”

“No need to worry about me, Onee-sama, I love to blindly pursue the latest technology. Someday, I want to ride in a transparent tube tram… ah, excuse me.”

Shirai turned her back on Mikoto, stared at the screen, and placed the phone on her ear.

The caller was registered inside her phonebook.

On the screen was the liaison office of Academy City’s security forces, Judgment.

Judgment was like the police, it was responsible for handling cases that were caused by misuse of esper powers. Shirai was one of them as well.

“Shirai here. I finally get to go shopping with Onee-sama, and the atmosphere’s rather good. Is there really anything so important for you to bother me?”

“Wa! Then am I holding Misaka-san’s virginity? What a relief.”

The other person on the phone was also a Judgment member. The voice sounded sweet, as if her mouth was stuffed with candy, but on hearing that, Shirai really wanted to cut the line.

“Shirai-san, there are some things happening right now that I can’t handle as a newcomer, so if you’re free, I’ll like to ask for your suggestion as a senpai.”

“Just ‘if you’re free’?”

“Yes.”

“Do you know that I finally got my wish to go out with Onee-sama?”

“Yes, this timing is too good, I’m stunned myself. Seems like heaven wants me to let out a cry of victory. Wahahaha!”

Shirai picked up the phone and gently tapped the microphone onto the wall of the shop beside her.

“Ugwaa! My… my ears hurt! What’s with that strange sound…”

“You say anything troublesome, I’ll let you hear the sound of nails scratching on glass, okay?”

“A-Anyway, please get to the 177th Branch Office in thirty minutes. The situation now is getting worse.”

The other person cut the call.

“Sigh…” Shirai Kuroko closed her phone, looking guilty as she said to Misaka Mikoto, “Sorry, Onee-sama. I don’t know how to apologize to you. Judgment gave me work to do without understanding the situation…”

“No problem, no problem. I’ll send you off with a bright smile.”

“…You’re not even saying a single word of comfort, I really want to cry…alright then, I’m off. Take care, Onee-sama.”

Shirai turned and headed toward the bus stop. In order to save time, she decided to take the last bus.

Walking halfway though, Mikoto suddenly said,

“Kuroko, I know that work is beyond your control, but I’ll advise you to come back earlier. It might rain tonight.”

“Ah, I forgot to check the weather report, didn’t know about that. Thanks for reminding me, Onee-sama. We’ll meet back later at the dorm.”

Shirai turned and bowed at Mikoto before turning back and running to the bus stop. Behind her, Mikoto’s footsteps were getting softer and further, finally unable to be heard.

Shirai was somewhat mindful about the weather, so she looked up at the evening sky. There was no sign of rain coming anytime soon.

(Eh…?)

Suddenly, Shirai felt that what Mikoto had said just now didn’t feel right.

It might rain tonight.

These words may seem normal, but this was Academy City. It had three sets of satellites, and one of them was the Tree Diagram, which had perfect simulation capabilities. In other words, the residents of Academy City wouldn’t use the word ‘maybe’ to describe the weather.

(If so, Onee-sama…)

Though Mikoto’s words made Shirai unsettled, Shirai decided to continue on with the job at hand. The last bus would leave in ten minutes. Shirai held onto her dry and crumpled bag tightly as she dashed toward the destination which she could not see. Unknowingly, the minor doubt in Shirai’s heart vanished completely.

Between the Lines 1

District 7 of Academy City.

In a corner of District 7, there was a student dorm where Kamijou Touma was staying. Although it was in the same school district as the School Garden, it was ordinary and low profile.

Of course, that place was a boys dormitory, but one of the rooms was an exception. There was a silver-haired, green-eyed, fourteen- or fifteen-year-old-girl wearing a white nun's habit.

The idle girl, Index, was occupying the space in front of the television.

The television was currently airing the weather report, and in the background was a large map of Japan. The nee-chan in a suit was smiling as the humidity was reported. A while back, it was the UV rays report, and now it was a new gimmick. The ordinary high school student Kamijou Touma could feel that the season was changing from that minor change (though the weather was still hot).

"Touma, Touma. They're just drawing rings on the map of Japan, how can they tell tomorrow's weather like this?"

Index asked that without turning her head around. Kamijou's frustrated voice came back from the preparation table. Tonight's dinner was deep-fried chicken cutlets, and he was about to toss the marinated chicken into the wok.

"Index, stay away from the TV when you're watching it. Also, those ring things are called isobars. By knowing the rise and fall in air pressure, you can guess whether there would be rain-producing clouds. However, it might rain when the clouds hit a mountain, so we can't always use air pressure to judge this."

"Wooahh… eh? Wait… using the landscape to predict the changes in weather… ah! So Academy City has learned how to use artificial methods to measure feng shui?"

"Seems like you're getting too excited, so I'm not going to curb your enthusiasm. I'll let the calico cat eat it."

Kamijou used a pair of metal chopsticks that were used for frying to pick a piece of well-fried chicken from the wok, and placed it on a plate before putting the plate on the ground. The calico cat that was curled up beside Index immediately reacted, and with the speed of a flying arrow, rushed toward the plate.

It nibbled at the chicken before rolling on the ground, as if it was saying, "It's hot! But I must eat it! It's really hot!" Kamijou then took another plate, filled it with water and placed it on the ground. The calico cat didn't seem to be a natural wildcat, or maybe it

had been domesticated before, as even with the crackling sound from the pot, it was not afraid.

Index, who was sitting in front of the television, saw that and immediately jumped up.

“So… so mean! Touma would be angry every time I eat it when you’re not looking! Why is Touma only good to Sphinx?”

“Ah? It’s not that I’m not letting you eat. It’s because you’ll always eat everything up when I’m not looking… Stop it, stop it!! That one is still raw, it’s just marinated—!!”

Kamijou skillfully used the metal chopsticks to block the gluttonous girl who was attacking at full force, protecting today’s dinner. During that tumult, there were already two pieces of metal burnt black.

A really hungry Index was unable to eat the meat, and ended up biting the back of Kamijou’s head.

All of a sudden, she tilted her head and asked like an innocent child, “However, Touma, why is the weather report nee-chan often wrong? Does stupidity look like a profitable thing?”

“To be said that by someone who’s like that, the weather reporter nee-chan is also pitiful—Owowow!”

The boy’s scream accompanied the sound of sharp teeth biting.

“B-because the weather report isn’t 100% accurate! It used to be, but it seems that the calculating device is broken.”

“???”

There seemed to be many doubts in Index’s head, but Kamijou didn’t intend to explain further.

Tree Diagram.

One of the three satellites that Academy City possessed, a supercomputer that could accurately predict where all the air molecules would move. However, it didn’t exist anymore.

Kamijou stared at the screen.

The weather report that had lost its perfect instrument was over, and what replaced it was the traffic report within Academy City.



CHAPTER 2

Girls Facing Off.

Space_and_Point.

Part 1

The school bus that Shirai Kuroko was riding was shared by the five schools in the School Garden.

With the financial power that each school had, having their own buses wasn't a problem. However, each school had the ideal of "letting students engage society more for their own safety", and gathered the bus system as one.

The buses owned by the five schools had large and luxurious interiors, earning it the moniker "double procession limo". The student seats were located below, while the top was a café. The bus would always move in a fixed route, down the roads to the five dormitories.

The place where Shirai Kuroko was getting off wasn't in front of the Tokiwadai Middle School dormitory.

She got off in front of another school's dormitory, mixing together with female students from other schools, stretched her back and gently sighed, thinking, (Does that kind of bus really allow students to interact more with society?)

There were other bus services passing through in front of the Tokiwadai dormitory, and they were ordinary buses. There was absolutely no comparison between the school buses and those ordinary buses.

The time was 7:30 PM.

They could still see the sunset at that time during summer vacation, but since it was the middle of September, the sky was currently completely dark.

Shirai pulled out the Judgment armband from her bag, put it on the sleeve of her uniform, and headed off in a completely different direction from where the girls around her were moving to.

Once the mood changed from “after school” to “work”, the shriveled bag became even more cumbersome. That was because what she needed wasn’t “items required for school”, but “items required for battle”.

Beside the student dormitory, there was another school.

It was an ordinary rectangular concrete school compound, completely different from the School Garden. Shirai walked inside, getting a pair of slippers at the staff entrance, where there were hardly any students around, and headed down the corridor lit by a neat row of overhead lamps. After walking on the icy and hard plastic floor for a while, one could see a door with a signboard. The words on the signboard read “Judgment 177th Branch”.

There was a glass board beside the door. After going through a fingerprint, pulse and finger motion scan, Shirai Kuroko didn’t knock on the door, but choose to push the door forcefully.

The door created a loud noise.

The girl behind the door was terrified. Her name was Uiharu Kazari. She was of similar age as Shirai, but as her body frame was more petite, and her shoulders were narrow; she looked somewhat child-like. It was rare to see someone like her who, despite wearing a summer sailor uniform, didn’t look like a middle school student. She wore decorations of roses, hibiscus and other flowers on her short black hair, and from afar, it looked like a colorful flower vase.

Uiharu looked absolutely terrified as Shirai stormed into the 177th Branch Office.

“What’s going on? There’re so many Judgment members, so why look for me?”

“Hm, thinking about it again, it need not necessarily be Shirai-san.”

“…You knew that I was shopping with Onee-sama. Since you stubbornly called me over, shouldn’t you say something?”

“Banzai—!”

“You have got to be kidding me! Why are you raising your hands and cheering?”

Shirai used her teleport, got right in front of Uiharu, and used both fists to squeeze her temples. As Shirai was still holding onto the shriveled bag, the buttons on it were touching Uiharu’s ear slightly.

They were both first-year students.

But as Shirai was a Level 4 from Tokiwadai Middle School, there was a significant difference between both of them. Besides, while Shirai had been working on her first

mission after joining Judgment, she had saved Uiharu, who had still been an ordinary student. Shirai herself didn't mind at all, it was just that it bothered Uiharu a lot.

The 177th Branch Office didn't look like a school classroom, but rather like an office. There were many of those metal desks seen in a city hall, and there were several sets of computers on them.

Uiharu was facing a computer, sitting on a chair. The ergonomic chair had curvy lines on it, making it look like a clock that a surrealist painter like Salvador Dali designed. It was a scientific chair that was hailed to be able to reduce fatigue to the minimum.

As Shirai moved behind Uiharu and pressed on her temples, her narrowed eyes naturally saw the computer screen.

The screen seemed to be showing a GPS satellite map. On it, there was a red X; seemed like something happened. Other places were also being indicated on the map, and in other windows, there were photographs or something like that.

Shirai could only learn what any of those things meant by asking Uiharu.

However, Shirai just glanced at it for a while, and said, "Ah, isn't that happening in school?"

If it was something that was happening in school, they would be using a school map, and not a GPS map.

Judgment was basically an organization meant to maintain law and order inside school compounds. Thus, Judgment had a branch office in every single school. It was also unlike Anti-Skill, which operated on a 24 hours basis without rest. Every day, until school ended for the day, the office would be locked, and there wouldn't be anyone inside guarding (today was an exception).

Unless it was an emergency situation, anything that happened outside school was basically Anti-Skill's responsibility. It was because the adults felt that they shouldn't allow students to patrol around in dangerous alleys or in the middle of the night.

Shirai stopped pressing onto Uiharu's temples, and Uiharu seemed to be relieved.

"I've already followed through the procedures and contacted Anti-Skill. However, the situation does seem really weird. Anti-Skill will immediately ask us to provide the relevant information. I thought that Shirai-san would be clearer on how to answer this. Ah, I'll prepare some red tea."

"No need, I don't like to have tea with my stomach empty."

To Shirai, red tea was just a supplement to snacks or sweets. Afternoon tea or anything that had tea as the main course wasn't Shirai's type.

Hearing Shirai's casual reply, Uiharu was nevertheless shocked, her face turning pale.

"Ugh… uuu…! I studied books about red tea in order to follow a rich lady's lifestyle, and even prepared special aromatic stuff like rose oil… only for you to reject it with an even more lady-like sentence! Doesn't it sound nice to drink red tea in school? It really feels posh!"

The rich girls of Tokiwadai Middle School were the idols of all the girls in Academy City. However, most of them did not know what kind of life the Tokiwadai students went through. Thus, some of them became fanatical regarding those elite girls schools and would often learn some strange things, ending up in that situation like Uiharu.

"Sigh, such formality can only be done by upstarts. Anyway, what's going on?"

"Ah, to be able to be rich, it's alright to be an upstart… to have these kind of thoughts, I'm really just a girl from the streets. As for what happened, it isn't anything major, basically, it's just a robbery on the street. However, there are many of these robbers, it's not really a smart way to do it."

Shirai digested Uiharu's words in her mind, placed the dry and shriveled bag on the chair, and focused on the screen.

The computer screen displayed the map of District 7, and in a corner on the road in front of a bus station, there was an X. On the road nearby, there were some colored arrowheads, which probably indicated where the robbers ran.

Shirai revealed an intrigued look.

"We shouldn't be settling this, should we?"

"But there are several suspicious things about this case. According to eyewitnesses, what was stolen was a luggage bag."

"A luggage bag?"

"Ah, Shirai-san, don't you know? They're as big as a suitcase, only that they have wheels underneath. It's not often for people to use this when they're travelling alone, so most of the time, it's the air hostesses that are using it," Uiharu explained simply yet effectively. "According to the eyewitness, there is also an invitation slip on it."

"So basically, it's just a luggage bag that has an invitation slip on it? What's so strange about this?"

"Eh, anyway, just look at this image. This is a photograph taken by a self-defense type robot; I'll enlarge the part where the luggage bag is."

Uiharu pressed a few buttons, and a new window opened. On it, one could see the serial number, owner and destination on the slip.

On seeing the destination, Shirai couldn't help but frown.

"Subsidiary calculus facility of Tokiwadai Middle School…? I've never heard of this before."

"Ah, so there's no such place, is there? It's hard for us to contact the School Garden, so we couldn't confirm it. Oh yeah, even when the Daihaseisai is approaching, the School Garden isn't an arena, so it's not open to outsiders."

From how Uiharu said that, it seemed like Shirai was making her even more bothered.

"I've checked the serial number on the slip, and it doesn't seem right. Even though it's true that there is a good with this serial number that is to be delivered, the contents seem to be a cooling device that's to be installed on a computer simulator. No matter what, that kind of thing can't just be stuffed in a luggage bag?"

"What did you say…? It's alright if it's just metal parts, but I've never heard about the School Garden using any machinery from the outside world."

"Just by analyzing the image of this slip, it's hard to tell whether it's a fake. Maybe it is just that someone just randomly placed a slip on it."

"…Wait a sec, instead of asking around for eyewitnesses' testimony, why not ask the person who was robbed to make things simpler?"

"Because the person is missing…" Uiharu casually said.

Shirai gasped and turned around to look at Uiharu.

Uiharu then explained, "Seems like this victim doesn't want to rely on us, but to use his own power. Do you want to see the actual video? There are more than ten criminals, and only one victim. But after the incident, it looks like he made a call, and even pursued them."

Uiharu pressed a few buttons, and another window appeared on the screen full of windows. The location seemed to be a road in front of the bus stop, as a man wearing a classy Western outfit looked around before making a call urgently. He was not using a cell phone, but radio equipment.

"It's here."

Uiharu suddenly stopped the video temporarily.

"Is there anything strange that you captured?"

Shirai gazed at the still screen, but she couldn't see anything strange. The man in Western clothes holding the radio equipment was shaking his head around, so his face couldn't be seen clearly.

"Shirai-san, when the victim's Western clothes flip up, is there something underneath?"

"Eh, now that you mention it, actually…"

Underneath the Western clothes, which were flipped up due to the man shaking about, a black tape-like thing was beside his stomach.

"By widening the image, we can see the model number. L_Y010021. A special large-scale manufactured gun strap, one that can be hidden underneath the clothes. Don't the policemen in those cop shows pull out their guns from their clothes? It's that thing," Uiharu said after enlarging the image of the gun strap.

Shirai smiled and said, "Maybe it's just a decoration."

"Yeah, maybe so, including this."

Next, Uiharu pressed another few buttons. The area of the chest of the man wearing Western clothing was enlarged, and there were several hundred arrowheads pointing at it. Those arrowheads indicated the slight movement of the clothes.

As if they were being attracted by a magnet, the numerous arrowheads formed the shape of a pistol.

"We got very few images here… these are all we have. Shirai-san, what do you think?"

If it was not that man trying to avoid being caught on camera all that time, it was while the criminals were running away and avoiding the cameras, with the man chasing after them, which ended up with that man not getting caught on camera.

Shirai thought of that, and said, "Hm, I have a feeling that this is going to be one really tough case."

"Huh? Shirai-san, did a Far Vision type power awaken within you?"

"Stop going off topic. The gun, it's hard to tell whether it's real with these pictures alone. However, that radio equipment looks similar to those that the experts use during my Judgment training. If so… I see, this is truly a troublesome case. Besides, it's also suspicious that the victim didn't report the case to us."

A victim who acted on his own.

And a luggage bag that was related to Tokiwadai Middle School.

A full suit preparation that was too professional.

The case did seem weird. Also, if there was the possibility of a gunfight, Anti-Skill would have to change their armor equipment. The chances of Judgment taking part in this were slim (since not all of them were Level 4s like Shirai), but it was beneficial to have someone who knew the situation inside the School Garden and Tokiwadai Middle School.

“Shirai-san, should we focus more on the robbers or the victim?”

“We should chase both sides. If we can’t do that, we’ll take the robbers first. Besides, we don’t have to chase after the victim once we get the luggage bag back. Without pursuing the victim, the victim will still come over and contact us.”

Shirai sighed and took a step back.

Next, she ordered Uiharu.

“Alright, can we check where the robbers ran? Come to think of it, it took me thirty minutes to get here, we should have their whereabouts now, right?”

“I don’t think so.” Uiharu said casually. “After stealing the luggage bag, they didn’t use a vehicle, but ran away into the underground. Maybe they want to avoid satellite surveillance.”

“…Avoid satellite surveillance? But aren’t there many cameras underground? Besides the fixed ones, there are also many self-defense robots patrolling around, aren’t there?”

“Yes, however, it’s easier to hide underground. As long as they don’t get caught on tape by the satellite camera, they can use the blind spots caused by the presence of the crowd to avoid getting caught on camera. Also, it’s faster for them to go underground now. Right now, the electricity isn’t working properly, causing the traffic lights to not function, and now, there are traffic jams around lines 3, 48, 131, and the area around the crime scene. So it’s beneficial for the robbers to run away underground, in terms of speed and stealth.”

“I see.”

Shirai gently nodded her head.

After being contacted by Uiharu, Anti-Skill should be getting to work. The problem was, in that kind of traffic congestion, Anti-Skill’s vehicles couldn’t reach the scene. Also, they couldn’t tell how serious the situation was, so it might take some time for them before they could even request for helicopter assistance. Though the complicated procedures were meant to prevent members from taking actions on their own, it took up a lot of time when they had to adapt quickly. That was a disadvantage of working as a group.

“Sigh, looks like it’ll be faster for me to make a personal trip.”



“Eh? Shirai-san is leaving? Wouldn’t I have to face Anti-Skill’s interrogation alone? So troublesome—!”

Uiharu loudly protested. However, Shirai just replied calmly.

“Don’t worry, I’ll settle it immediately.”

Shirai Kuroko grabbed the shriveled bag that was lying on the chair and headed towards the exit.

Without turning her head back, she said, “Who do you think I am? No matter whether it’s underground or anywhere else, it’s all the same to me.”

Part 2

Shirai Kuroko’s ability was called Teleport.

However, that sort of power couldn’t be done at will. The maximum mass of the thing to be teleported was 130.7 kilograms, and no matter how large or small the item was, she couldn’t teleport more than 81.5 meters. Also, she could only teleport away things that she could touch, so she couldn’t teleport things that were far away back to her.

But on the other hand.

The source of the teleportation energy was her own body, so it was not hard at all.

The sound of air being cut could be heard.

For every eighty meters that Shirai Kuroko moved, she would target the next point that was eighty meters away. From an observer’s viewpoint, it was like she was appearing at one spot, disappearing immediately afterward. Of course, it would be faster than using her own legs to run, and converted to speed, it was about 288 km/h.

(Luckily, teleportation is a point-to-point movement and not a straight line movement, so there’s no inertia. If not, it’ll be embarrassing if my skirt flips up due to air resistance.)

Shirai thought as she continued to teleport. The sidewalks, handrails, and even the top of the vending machines had become her stepping board.

Though such an action would normally cause surprise among pedestrians, everyone there was an esper. Also, Shirai was wearing a Tokiwadai Middle School uniform, and there was a Judgment armband on her, so there wasn’t too much commotion caused.

The robbers were running underground, but Shirai was moving above ground. It was because there were a limited number of exits, by confirming where the exits were, there was no fear of the target escaping. Also, if she chased the robbers from behind, it would cause psychological pressure on them, causing them to hurt ordinary civilians in the process (though she didn't know whether they were armed, even if they were unarmed, there were ten of them, which was a big threat to any ordinary person). Basically, as there were a limited number of exits, once there was a commotion, it was hard for any ordinary person to escape. Thus, the underground streets were places where she had to be more careful than the surface.

To catch the robbers, she should choose a place where there were no ordinary people around, and the best place was on the surface.

It would be perfect if she could settle it quickly.

At that moment, the phone rang.

Shirai picked up the phone but did not stop her teleporting. The voice she heard interrupted at times, and this was because Shirai was teleporting around, the electrowaves positioning continued to change as a result.

"Shirai-san, I located… the robbers… from the underground mall at Area Sale, exit A03… they're exiting the underground… seems like their intention is to run to the end of an underground mall, and then run off to another one…"

Shirai Kuroko just answered, "I see them."

She then cut the phone line and slipped the phone into her pocket.

At a construct that looked like a subway station, there was a group of people passing through the gaps between the cars that were packed together. Those men clad in Western clothing were moving through the honks of the cars, and one of them was holding onto a white luggage bag. Maybe they wanted to maintain a low profile, as their attitudes were rather low key. After passing through a road, they dashed into an alley.

Shirai tightly grabbed onto her shriveled bag.

She stomped hard onto the ground.

In an instant, she was already in the alley, and standing right in the middle of the ten men. Shirai was smiling at the man dragging the luggage bag, who was staring back with a stunned expression. Shirai's fingertips were already touching the luggage bag.

Teleport.

Shirai again disappeared before appearing in front of the men, blocking their escape route. The luggage bag accompanied her as it was teleported and was right beside her.

Placing one hand on her waist, Shirai touched the luggage bag on the ground with the other, and said, “Excuse me, I’m from Judgment. Why I’m here, I believe there’s no need for explanation, is there?”

It sounded like an inquiry. However, the tone was rather mocking.

The men’s reactions were fast. They all stuffed their hands into their Western clothing, pulling out black guns that were of the same model. Those guns gave the sense that they were rather heavy.

(Peh, as expected, it’s not an ordinary robbery! Are we filming a cop show?)

Shirai immediately bent down and hid behind the luggage bag, but the men seemed rather confident in their shooting; and without a single sense of hesitation they squeezed the trigger. Their target should be the part that was not blocked by the luggage bag. Shirai’s throat made an unnatural whistling sound. Her teleporting ability was unable to accurately teleport the bullets away one by one.

The ten guns opened fire.

But before that, Shirai had already activated her teleport, the target being behind the last man at the rear.

Shirai Kuroko and the luggage bag vanished, leaving behind her shriveled bag behind. Then, the bag landed on the floor.

The men saw the enemy vanish and panicked. Using the opportunity, Shirai used both hands to grab onto the luggage bag and slam it into the back of the last man.

“Ugh!”

The man standing the furthest back gave a scream, causing the other robbers to turn around. At that moment, Shirai touched another man and activated her teleport. The man was immediately teleported, but only by a few centimeters, and his body was turned around 180 degrees.

The eight men turned around, and the man who had been teleported was facing them. Like a coup, their guns were pointed at each other.

“Ah!”

The man who had been turned around frantically pointed his gun upwards. At that moment, Shirai kicked him in the back. Like dominoes, the robbers fell down one by one. Shirai raised the luggage bag and slammed it into the man’s wrist which was still holding onto the gun. Short screams constantly echoed throughout the air. Every man was being tangled up by their comrades, and they didn’t dare to shoot in fear of hitting

them. Finally, the group of men armed with instruments of death was knocked unconscious without any resistance.

“Too easy to handle. Besides, it’ll make people uncomfortable.”

Shirai mockingly said that, but there was no one who could answer her.

Using the tips of her toes, Shirai gently kicked the robber, trying to confirm if he was awake, and used special non-metallic handcuffs to cuff them up. She used them all up the moment she reached the fourth one, and then had to use abandoned wires left around to tie them up. Though bound, the men still hadn’t woken up.

After calling Anti-Skill with her phone, Shirai looked at what they were armed with.

She couldn’t see the name and serial number of the gun, but they were different from the guns used during Judgment’s training. The guns used in Academy City weren’t made of metal, so they were rather light. But those guys’ were as heavy as lead. There were numbers and letters carved into the side, so Shirai guessed that it was the serial number. However, there didn’t seem to be anything of particular note. Since Shirai wasn’t a member of Anti-Skill, who specialized in gunfights, and that she normally relied on her powers, she didn’t have the necessary weapon technical knowledge.

Besides that, after searching through the men, she couldn’t find any identification. Maybe they had been deliberately removed. Shirai saw the men’s faces before she inadvertently clicked her tongue.

“…A gold tooth?”

A certain unconscious man had his mouth wide open, and that attracted Shirai’s attention. Academy City had developed many new and quality materials, so there wasn’t anyone there who used gold teeth.

Checking through their pants and cell phones, the address lists were completely blank, and the models were old. They didn’t look like they were sold in Academy City.

Academy City’s scientific technology was hailed to be twenty to thirty years ahead of the outside world. Besides electronics, small parts that didn’t seem to be related to technology on first glance were rather different.

(From the way they’re holding the guns, at least they have some form of training, but they couldn’t do anything to my power. It was like they met an esper for the first time… maybe they are experts from the outside world, so powers are foreign to them.)

“…”

A luggage bag that people from the outside world would do all that for.

Shirai again looked at that thing beside her hand.

The luggage bag was extremely large. It was like an ordinary one, rectangular, and it seemed like she was able to squeeze herself in. The color was white, and it seemed to be made of some special material, with some sort of wax covering it.

She touched the ring on the luggage bag.

“As expected… it’s locked.”

But on observing it closely, she found that the lock was made rather intricately. Besides the traditional locks and an electronic one, there was a so-called magnetic field of infinite permutations on it.

“Too bad, with this in my hands, the lock is useless.”

Shirai had the ability to teleport. As she could only teleport the things that she could touch, she couldn’t teleport away what was inside. However, she could teleport the bag that was on the outside to achieve a similar effect.

If it was a large object like a bank vault, she wouldn’t be able to move it. But it was no problem for her when it was just a luggage bag.

Shirai casually placed her right hand on the luggage bag, feeling the surface with her fingertips.

(Huh?)

At that moment, Shirai realized something.

There was no gap on the luggage bag at all. It was as if it was waterproofed, as something was wrapped around it, maybe rubber, blocking all the gaps.

(Is it… something light sensitive like film? Is it… something brittle? Damn it, I used it to smack those men unconscious.)

Shirai thought before coming to a conclusion anyhow.

(Before I get a telepath or someone with X-ray vision to check this out, I shouldn’t open it so casually.)

Shirai observed the luggage bag for a while, feeling that it was completely airtight. Coincidentally, she saw something that was similar to tape, like a seal stuck on the side of the luggage to prevent people from randomly opening it. It was the slip that Uiharu first saw. The printing was as intricate as that of paper money; maybe there was an IC chip inside or something like that.

The contents on the slip were the same as what Uiharu had shown her.

They could only tell if it was a fake through a machine, but at least through the human eye, there was nothing suspicious about it.

(This logo is…)

Shirai Kuroko again touched the surface of the luggage bag.

Besides the slip, there was some sort of logo on the surface of the luggage bag, like a seal or something similar. It was circular, with many squares inside, the image was very simple. She seemed to have seen it before, but she couldn't think of it.

"…If there's anything I don't know, asking others would be the quickest way to get the answer."

Shirai was too lazy to think about it, and pulled out the phone from her skirt pocket. She pulled out the scroll from the small cylinder, revealing the extremely thin body of the phone, used the camera function to take photos of the luggage bag, the slip, and the logo, attached a few words "please check these out", and sent them to Uiharu.

One hundred and twenty seconds later, there was a response from the phone.

The moment after first tone of the receiving tune, Shirai pressed the call button.

"Shirai-san, this is Uiharu. I completed the mission, request permission to report the results and to reward myself."

"I allow you to report the results, but you're not allowed to reward yourself."

Shirai casually said, however, she was speechless at Uiharu's investigating ability (though she kept it under control). Though Uiharu had the authority to check the records, this searching speed was way too fast.

"You can't refuse a request!! Um, anyway, the results, Shirai-san, basically, that luggage bag is a highly airtight one, it can reflect away any cosmic rays. Do you see that the surface is rather shiny?"

Now that she mentioned it, it was true. Shirai looked at the surface of the luggage bag. It was like a layer of wax had been applied on it, so shiny that Shirai could see her face on it.

"You can treat it as a deluxe version of an astronaut suit or space shuttle surface. Such technology is obviously made in Academy City."

"But…why must the case have an extra layer to protect it from cosmic rays?"

“The purpose, obviously, is to protect it from cosmic rays. There’s no point in doing this on earth, or maybe it’s because recently, there are holes in the ozone layer.”

(If so…this thing is to be used outside the atmosphere…even in outer space…?)

Such unexpected information stunned Shirai.

“Next, the slip. Before that…Shirai-san, there is something that I need to ask you to do. Please change the phone to RWS mode and take a photo of it again. There should be a red box on the right side of the slip, so take the photo with that as the center.”

“What is RWS mode?”

“The mode that’s used to read an IC chip’s electronic information! As a Judgment member, everyone has a duty to have this sort of phone! Didn’t I install an expansion chip inside your phone before? You didn’t read the instructions?”

“The phone’s operating method is the same, so I was too lazy to read the details…”

“Really! Anyway, please open the selection menu…”

Shirai followed Uiharu’s instructions and operated the phone. The screen was showing something that she had never seen before. She took another photo of the slip, and then sent the photo and the attached data back to Uiharu.

“Oh, I got it. Eh…according to the results…no doubt about it. This slip itself is an authentic one made by Academy City.”

Uiharu’s tone became extremely serious.

“An authentic one…if so, the receiving address is the School Garden?”

“Yes.”

On hearing that, Shirai sunk into deep thought.

The Subsidiary Calculus Facility of Tokiwadai Middle School on the slip didn’t exist.

If the receiver didn’t exist, there was no point in sending it like that. If so, those words were just codes.

“The reading of the information on the IC chip is complete. What’s on it is supplement information on a bar code. It includes the plane’s model and the atmospheric work schedule number. These are definitely the internal numbers of Academy City; it’s the same as those of District 23. Seems like this has become more dangerous.”

“District 23…it’s that school district which has the only airport, launch area, and other related facilities set up for aeronautical development that ordinary students aren’t allowed to enter, isn’t it?”

“That’s right. Isn’t there a logo on it? Yes, that circular logo with many squares in it. That’s the logo of District 23, it’s similar to a school logo.”

On hearing that, Shirai clicked her tongue again.

She should have thought of it before. But thinking back, it was normal not to remember such things that were unrelated to ordinary students. It was just because she saw it every day on the screen when the reporters were reporting news regarding the launch shuttles every time, which was how it ended up making a deep impression on her.

“The sender is also from District 23. The security there is extremely high, so according to regulations, it won’t accurately display the name of the facility.”

Shirai again stared at the slip.

The date and time was exactly the same as when Academy City’s space shuttle had returned.

The sender was from District 23, the school district that had the only airport and focused only on aeronautical research.

(Who does District 23 want to send this to…? And who are these people that tried to steal it…?)

Thinking about it for a while, Shirai decided to say her thanks to Uiharu first.

“Thanks for the help. I’ll think about it while escorting these men and the luggage bag.”

“Ah—! I just said it, I want a reward! Like a real rich girl’s afternoon tea! It can’t be just drinking red tea, I must have a refined lady’s attitude and atmosphere!”

Uiharu frantically said that, only for Shirai to ignore it and cut the phone line.

Seeing the ultra-thin main body of the phone roll back into the side of the cylinder like a scroll, Shirai slipped the phone back into her pocket, still thinking.

However, Shirai didn’t have any knowledge about aeronautical development.

Thinking back, the recent space knowledge that she had was only about Academy City and other world organizations firing rockets or some space shuttles.

“By linking these two together… it’s a bit forced… but… hm, no matter what, I can’t conclude anything without finding out what’s inside.”

Shirai sighed and sat on the luggage bag.

Those men clad in Western clothes were suspicious, but so was the original owner of the luggage bag.

“Anyway, the situation now is completely out of my range of duty, there’s no need to think so much about it.”

After randomly coming up with that conclusion, Shirai obediently waited for Anti-Skill to arrive. Maybe it was due to the traffic congestion, as Anti-Skill still hadn’t arrived.

Besides, they did not have powers. It couldn’t be helped, so Shirai didn’t feel irritated about it.

At that point, Shirai’s phone suddenly rung.

On checking the small screen on the phone, it was Misaka Mikoto. Shirai frantically turned towards the men who were still on the floor. They didn’t seem to be awake, but if they were to accidentally hear the conversation, it would be troublesome for them. The problem was that she couldn’t leave the scene because of personal matters. After some struggle, Shirai decided to cup her mouth and speak softly before pressing the call button.

“Ah, Kuroko…? The reception doesn’t seem to be good; where are you?”

“Eh? Erm…somewhere not convenient to reveal.”

“Um? Oh, you’re still working? Sorry to disturb you.”

“No problem. What’s up?”

“Never mind, since you’re working, never mind. I heard from the kouhais that dorm supervisors may call for a sudden inspection. I wanted to ask you to hide all the personal stuff in my room.”

“Eh? Onee-sama, aren’t you in the dormitory?”

“Erm, yeah. Then I’ll just have to ask someone else, I’ll also call her to hide your stuff as well, okay?”

“Ah…w-what? O-Onee-sama! Don’t ask them…? Please wait, Onee-sama! Please don’t take away my right to accept this reward! I’ll get back to the dorm immediately!”

“…Who said that there is a reward or something? Besides, aren’t you working? However, it might rain tonight, hurry up and finish the work if you don’t want to get caught in the rain, bye bye.”

The other person mercilessly cut the phone line.

Shirai stared blankly at the phone, as if she had been abandoned, her feelings had taken a huge hit.

At that moment, a set of light footsteps could be heard.

(Ah…yes, I forgot to seal up this place with the keep out tape due to the fight just now.)

Shirai sat on the luggage bag and casually thought.

The next moment…

The feeling that was supporting her weight vanished. It was like she accidentally fell from a chair, she couldn't feel her own weight. Shirai's vision spun around quickly, her back falling towards the dirty ground. Just as she was about to feel the pain of landing on the floor on her back, she could see the rectangular night sky formed by the gap left behind from all the buildings around.

(What…?)

Shirai's first reaction was to struggle and get up, but she immediately felt that something was amiss. Shirai reached around her, only to find that she couldn't touch anything. The luggage bag which she had used as a chair had vanished without a trace.

Like air.

Like it had been teleported.

(Tele… ported…)

The sudden situation caused Shirai's mind to go blank. She knew that something was happening, yet her thoughts were blurry.

Just as she was feeling imminent danger…

Something appeared in Shirai's right shoulder, who was facing the sky.

"Gaaccckk…!"

Her shoulder felt hot and painful, it felt like something within her broke. That heavy sound wasn't heard from the ear, but echoed throughout her entire body.

Looking down, a sharp metal object pierced through her short-sleeved shirt, nailed into her flesh. It was like a heavy piece of wire, however, the front continued to swirl around like a spring, and there was a white ceramic handle attached to it.

(A grapewine… bottle opener?)

Shirai tried desperately to calm her mind that was going erratic due to all the pain and activate her teleport. She only moved a few centimeters, but her body that had been on the ground was flipped ninety degrees up. Thus, she was now standing.

The thick liquid dripped and landed on the ground.

Someone was looking at her, clearly enjoying all of this.

Shirai Kuroko turned and stared at the entrance of the alley.

There was a girl there.

She was taller than Shirai. Her hair was tied in two ponytails, and she was wearing a Western school uniform. However, it was a winter uniform. The Western-style coat wasn't worn, but draped over her back, unbuttoned. She was not wearing any shirt underneath, her upper body exposed, with only a light pink cloth wrapped around her chest like underwear or bandages. There was a belt hung around her waist, but it didn't seem to fix the belt in place, it was more like a decoration. The belt wasn't made of leather, but rather, many pieces of metal. There was a ring on it, with a black metal cylinder that was longer than forty centimeters and three centimeters in diameter placed through it. It was a military flashlight that could be used as a baton.

She was probably a high school student, Shirai boldly guessed. Though it was unreliable to use appearances to gauge a person's age, to a middle school student, there seemed to be an insurmountable wall between a middle schooler and a high-school student, the difference was very noticeable.

There was a white luggage bag beside the girl.

It was the one that Shirai had been sitting on.

"As expected, it's teleportation. But…"

(She didn't touch the luggage bag at all? Maybe she went behind me first and then brought it back to where she originally was? No, but…)

An alarm rang inside Shirai's mind, telling her that this was no ordinary teleportation.

The girl's laugh snapped Shirai, who was lost in her own thoughts, back to reality.

"Oh my, you already realized it? As expected of a fellow teleporter, to see through it immediately. However, I'm a little different from you."

On hearing that, Shirai frowned.



Same type, but with some differences.

“My ability is Move Point. Compared to your third-rate ability, I don’t have to touch anything when I teleport something. So, impressive, isn’t it?” The girl plainly stated.

She glared at the men clad in Western clothing that were behind Shirai, and said, “Come to think of it, these guys are totally useless. Actually, I knew that they were useless, so I only told them to do such a trivial thing as to retrieve the bag, but I didn’t expect them to even be unable to do such a simple thing.”

Useless, guys, retrieve, trivial, told them.

From those words, Shirai could tell that the girl was working with the men clad in Western clothing.

Shirai warned her, “Since you’re doing all this, you should know my identity, right?”

The armband that indicated her status was now dyed black due to the blood that was flowing out from her wound.

“Of course I’m clear about it. That is why I dare to take action, Miss Shirai Kuroko of Judgment. If I wasn’t certain, why would I show myself so easily?”

Shirai didn’t understand what was inside the luggage bag, and she didn’t know what the intentions of the person in front of her were. But she knew that the girl, who was smiling at her, wouldn’t let her off so easily even when she was injured.

She was the enemy.

That was right, the girl in front of her wasn’t an ordinary girl, but the enemy.

“Cheh!”

Shirai used her strength and opened her legs wide. Due to inertia, her thighs were exposed. The belts strapped onto her thighs had numerous metal needles on them, like how a sharpshooter carried his bullets with him in a Western film. That was her final resort. By using teleporting, she could immediately teleport the needles into the target—a deadly technique.

However, the girl’s movements were faster than Shirai.

From the Western coat that was draped over her, her slender arms quickly pulled out the military flashlight that was attached to her waist.

After spinning it in her hand like a conducting baton, she aimed the flashlight at Shirai. She then slightly lifted the front tip of the flashlight, as if she was saying hello.

A change happened.

The men who had been beaten by Shirai and tied on the hands instantly vanished and appeared before the girl. The ten unconscious men were packed together like a shield.

However…

“Too naive!!”

Shirai fired the metal needles at the men without any hesitation. The numerous needles silently crossed the space, appearing at where the girl was. As it was not a straight movement, the men who were between them couldn’t block it. Shirai’s target was the girls’ limbs, and she even took measures to prevent hitting the vital points.

Teleportation didn’t move in a straight line, but rather, was a point-to-point movement, so there was no problem if there was anything in the middle. The needles that appeared in mid-air would pass through the girl’s soft muscles easily. Such an attack wouldn’t be affected by the texture. The basis of teleportation was that the object teleported would displace the object at the target.

So, there was no reason why Shirai’s attack wouldn’t pierce through the girl’s body.

However…

“Ah…”

Shirai let out a surprised cry.

The girl was no longer at that position.

She had already moved back by three to four paces, sitting on the white luggage bag, dangling her legs elegantly. It seemed like she had just sat on the luggage bag, and kicked the ground to force herself back using the wheels of the luggage bag.

The needles that Shirai had released floated in mid-air before landing on the ground like the unconscious men.

Teleport was basically a point-to-point movement, so once the target moved away from the original position by even the slightest bit, the attack wouldn’t hit her. Those men weren’t armor or shields, they were just tools meant to block Shirai’s vision.

The girl continued to dangle her legs as she sat on the luggage bag. The military flashlight that she was twirling in her hands pointed towards the needles, and like a fishing rod, she swung it up.

One of the needles that landed weakly after Shirai had launched it appeared in the girl's hand.

(Here it comes—!!)

Shirai concentrated, ready to guard herself, only for the girl to throw the needle back at her without using teleport (or her so-called Move Point). The needle proceeded on to move towards the center of Shirai's body in three dimensions.

In that narrow alley, there was nowhere to escape to.

Though she could use teleport to get to the other side of the wall, or in the building, Shirai didn't know what was inside. It would be terrible if she was to teleport in and overlap with other people.

But facing the incoming needle, there was no purpose in moving backwards.

Thus, Shirai decided to teleport forward. Past the needles, and appear in front of the girl. Shirai clenched her fist. Besides wanting to avoid the attack, she wanted to give a counter punch at the girl in front of her.

A wet sound echoed as a metal needle pierced Shirai Kuroko's abdomen from the back.

"…Ah…!?"

Shirai felt the inside of her body trembling. She couldn't take it anymore; the strength was instantly sapped away from her, and her legs weakened as she tumbled onto the ground.

Where she fell was beside the girl who was sitting on the luggage bag.

"Didn't I say it before?" The girl continued to sit there, dangling the other leg this time, smiling. "My teleport is different from yours; I don't have to touch the object."

Hearing that mocking voice, Shirai Kuroko was unable to even lift her head up.

The girl's method was actually very simple.

First, she used her hand to throw the needle over. As Shirai dodged it, she directed the needle through teleportation, letting the needle appear behind Shirai.

The momentum of the needle didn't decrease, it had just been turned around 180 degrees, only stopping when it drilled deep into Shirai Kuroko's abdomen. The terrifying sound of friction echoed throughout her body.

The sound of air being cut could be heard.

On closer inspection, all the metal needles that had been on the ground were now in the girl's hands.

"Too bad. You're from Tokiwadai? I thought that Misaka Mikoto isn't the type that would be desperate enough to involve her own kouhai. Come to think of it, when she first stopped that experiment, she didn't exactly do it alone. Seems like she's risking everything, is she?"

On hearing that, Shirai Kuroko trembled.

Her body, which was trembling and growing numb due to pain, was trembling for a different reason.

"What did… you say?"

Shirai concentrated and looked at the girl. She gritted her teeth, using all her strength, as if she was looking at the sky from the bottom of an abyss.

"Why… did you mention Onee-sama's name?"

The girl ignored Shirai's question.

To her, a severely injured Shirai was no longer a threat. In order to enjoy Shirai's remorseful expression, she would rather do the best thing, which was to make an unnecessary reply to Shirai's question.

"Eh?" The girl dangled her leg again, covering her mouth with her hand in an exaggerated manner, saying, "Didn't you know? To be used like this while not knowing anything… no way? Tokiwadai's Railgun shouldn't be that sort of person."

But the girl didn't answer Shirai's question.

The question that Shirai had managed to squeeze out with her last ounce of strength only garnered a self-satisfactory answer from the girl.

"Don't you think that this is too coincidental? After stealing the luggage bag, these men were caught in a traffic jam—it's like it was pre-planned. The electricity flow to the traffic lights was lost… haven't you thought of the reason? Don't you know what kind of power the Ace of Tokiwadai has?"

Shirai Kuroko glared at the head that was right in front of her, yet looked like it was in the sky.

The mysterious luggage bag, and the enemy sitting on top of it.

"What are you…?"

Shirai let out a voice that sounded like she was going to let out blood from her mouth anytime.

To think that Mikoto's lip balm felt so heavy.

"…What are you saying now…?"

"You probably don't know what Remnant is. Or maybe Silicorundum will confuse you." The girl happily twirled the needles in her hand, creating a clanking sound. "I suppose, that's the remnants of the Tree Diagram, you'd probably understand that now, wouldn't you? Even if it's beyond repair, it has the core of a supercomputer simulator."

Shirai Kuroko gasped.

"No… no way. Isn't that supposed to be floating in orbit…?"

That ridiculous truth stunned Shirai. It was because the Tree Diagram was the strongest simulator in the world that Academy City was so proud of, it should be inside a satellite that was in orbit. No matter what the people on earth did, they couldn't do anything to it. Also, if that thing malfunctioned (or even was destroyed), it would definitely be headline news.

But…

The luggage bag that the girl was sitting on was definitely created for outer space environment.

And the date and time on the slip were exactly the same as the moment when Academy City's space shuttle had returned.

Also, the fact the numerous organizations all around the world were rushing into space.

Shirai's mind was in total confusion. The girl pulled out a photograph from her skirt pocket and flung it with her fingers. The photo continued to spin like a flying saucer, landing in front of Shirai.

"This is an attached photograph in Academy City's internal report. No ordinary person can see it."

On the photo, there was the black outer space and a large earth. In front of the blue planet, which had a gradual arc, there was the debris of a satellite. Shirai had seen that certain satellite before on the news and the guide.

"Impossible…"

Just as Shirai was struck speechless, the photo suddenly vanished, appearing between the girl's index and middle fingers. It must have been claimed back by her Move Point.

"The Tree Diagram was already destroyed, which is why there are many people rushing to grab the remnants that are floating in orbit." The girl seemed to see something in Shirai's expression. "Misaka Mikoto is so pitiful. Her nightmare was finally ended with much difficulty because someone destroyed the Tree Diagram, and now everyone else wants to repair it. Once this gimmick is repaired, the experiment will likely continue. Hm, I can't really say that I don't understand her feelings."

The girl again said that name, causing Shirai's abdomen muscles to tighten.

Misaka Mikoto.

Shirai didn't understand what it had to do with Mikoto. No matter how much she tried to think of a link, she couldn't understand it. Though she still didn't know what had happened, Shirai's glare at the girl became even sharper. Just hearing Misaka Mikoto's name from that dangerous person, one could tell that there was lots of trouble.

"Hehe, oh my, seems like you don't know about anything. If so, it means that you don't know anything about the experiment. However, you should have seen some clues about it. Like for example… let me think, half a month ago, wasn't there a huge explosion at the depot? It ended up causing a disruption in the entire train service. In that situation, for you guys to let the train service become fully operational in a week, I'm rather impressed."

The girl said that happily, but Shirai was unable to say anything.

Shirai was anxious, as if a flame torch was burning her mind. However, she couldn't understand what the girl was talking about.

"Don't you understand? I said so much, don't you know? August 21st, that special day, did anything unusual happen around you?"

After hearing that date, Shirai couldn't even think of anything. Last month, on the 21st, it was not even a festive holiday.

(What on earth… is she saying? Is this just some meaningless talk…?)

Shirai was feeling suspicious deep inside. But the girl's words had some form of regularity, it didn't seem like it was randomly uttered.

"Alright, if you can find the truth, I can become friends with you."

The girl smiled and said that, but Shirai wasn't in the mood to reply to her.

Her lips were cracked, the taste of blood oozing out.

Shirai only knew two things.

One, she couldn't let the girl in front of her leave so easily.

Two, she couldn't hand the contents of the luggage bag over to anyone.

Shirai Kuroko put her hand in her skirt, drawing out the only needles left on the strap attached to her thigh. There were two of them. In order to increase her determination, she tightly grabbed hold of the needles, roaring unnecessarily at the sky.

In contrast, the girl was sitting on the luggage bag. She gracefully dangled her leg, knocking the large number of needles around, making clanking sounds, and then activated the military flashlight that also functioned as a police baton. She flicked her wrist around like a musical conductor holding a conducting baton, drew a circle, and in a gentle and proud manner, looked down at the weakling lying beside her.

In an instant, everything remained still.

On the road outside the entrance of the alley, a car's engine ignited.

As if predetermined, both of them launched their attacks.

It took less than a second for the victor to be decided.

The metal needles flew through the sky, a girl's clear blood splattered all over the place, screams echoing throughout the sky. Shirai Kuroko fell onto the floor, letting out a sound that reminded people of a dirty bag landing on the ground.

It was windy. The girl turned and left, leaving the Judgment member alone, and nobody could pursue her.

Without using Move Point, it was like she was enjoying her own footsteps.

Carrying a white luggage bag.

(Onee-sama…)

Shirai gritted her teeth in remorse, apologizing in her own heart. She couldn't say that result was good.

She knew clearly what she had to do.

But a teary Shirai Kuroko couldn't do a single thing.

Between the Lines 2

In the hospital, there was a bathroom that was for patients use.

The PE teacher clad in green sportswear attire, Yomikawa Aiho's back was leaning on the bathroom door. She had a beautiful face and glamorous body, the apparel could be said to spoil it. Especially her wonderful breasts that gave off an inexplicable mature charm even if they were suppressed by her sports attire. She herself didn't seem aware of her beautiful appearance, but that naïve character caused people to go even more gaga over her.

(Sigh, that Kikyou, finding trouble for me again.)

Yomikawa thought of that female researcher, her old friend, who was now hospitalized, and sighed. The researcher wasn't completely out of the woods yet, so Yomikawa was only allowed to visit her once. At that point, the female researcher immediately asked Yomikawa to take care of two children, and after saying that, lost consciousness, which gave no chance for Yomikawa to inquire further, nor any right to refuse.

The ones that needed to be cared for were two children with special abilities.

The sounds of the children were coming out from the other side of the door, or inside the bathroom.

"Splash splash splash! says Misaka as Misaka makes splashes in this narrow bathtub. With a petite body, any place can become an indoor entertainment facility, says Misaka as Misaka thinks of this new concept."

"Cheh… the hot water has gotten on me…! Stop swimming around in this bathtub, you!"

"It's too bad that you can't use reflection, says Misaka as Misaka reveals a pitiful expression. Come to think of it, the strongest esper is about to cry just because shampoo got into his eyes, says Misaka as Misaka finds it strange."

"It's not that I can't use reflection completely. Though I have to use your network to do the calculations, this is really embarrassing. But if I have to use reflection in the bathroom, can I even bathe? Also… I'm not going to cry! Getting shampoo in my eyes won't hurt, it's just that I never felt this before!"

"Splash splash splash—"

"Yomikawaaaaaa! Why do I have to put up this shitty brat's water kicks—!?"

Being dragged into the conversation so suddenly, Yomikawa frowned.

“That won’t do. There’s the possibility that the kid will drown in the bathroom, there must be someone to take care of her.”

“Then why aren’t you protecting her!?”

“That won’t do. I’ll be soaked if I bathe that naughty kid. Oh yeah, you haven’t bathed in quite a while, got to scrub yourself cleanly.”

“Damn it… Why is it that no one will listen to me properly!?”

“Don’t be agitated, don’t be agitated, says Misaka as Misaka comforts you. Misaka knows that you’re embarrassed, although Misaka verifies Misaka is properly wrapped in a bath towel. The atmosphere will be even more awkward if you’re mindful of it, says Misaka as Misaka gives advice as a lifetime elder.”

“Thank you. Let me reward you with a water column.”

“Wah!? says Misaka as Misaka is scared by this sudden attack! How mean! Before summer vacation ended, you risked your life to protect Misaka, says Misaka as Misaka protests with a pale face!”

“What… Hey, wait.”

“When Misaka was hit with the virus code, you were so gentle, and now you’re treating Misaka like this!? Don’t tell me you got tired of Misaka!? says Misaka as Misaka trembles in fright at the thought of this possibility!”

“…Ah? What did you say…? Virus code…?”

“Oh no! says Misaka as Misaka immediately covers her mouth!”

“Oh no, your head! How the hell do you *remember what happened that day*!?”

“About that, says Misaka as Misaka scratches her cheek with her forefinger.”

“Didn’t I delete your memories when I was deleting the virus code in your brain!?”

“Misaka Serial Number 10032 to Misaka Serial Number 20000 have a common memory through the network, says Misaka as Misaka honestly testifies.”

“…Oh?”

“Basically, even if a Misaka loses her memory, there are many backups that can be duplicated, so there is no problem at all, says Misaka as Misaka sticks her tongue out as she acts cute. Though Misaka lost her memory, she can regain her memory through the brains of the other Misakas, says Misaka as Misaka tries many postures to appease your anger.”

“So that means… you also remembered what I said that day…?”

“That’s right, I killed over ten thousand of the Sisters, but this doesn’t mean that I should just leave the remaining ten thousand to die! I know that these words are hypocritical, I know that I have no right to say such words, but no matter how much of a scumbag we are, no matter how many excuses we put forward, that can’t be the reasons to kill this brat!! …Ahh, says Misaka as Misaka is touched to tears while thinking back on this.”

“I’m gonna kill you… I’m gonna kill you, brat!”

“That won’t do; my friend has already asked me to take care of you, so you guys better not cause me any trouble.”

From the outside, Yomikawa heard the duo attacking each other with bathwater, and shouted. The doctor that looked like a frog had once said that taking care of those two kids was a real challenge, but right now, there wasn’t anything that was worth noting.

There seemed to be no need for her to look out for them, and so she could head back to work.

Yomikawa sighed, her back leaving the door, and said, “You two, I’m going to settle some Anti-Skill stuff, so stop quarreling. Wait for me here obediently; I’ll treat both of you with goodies.”

“Okay—, says Misaka as Misaka uses her sure-kill water kicks to whip up large amounts of water as she answers.”

“You braaaat!”

Yomikawa Aiho heard the roaring continue behind her, picked up the large sports bag that was placed beside her foot on her shoulder, and left the hospital.

Her eyes were now abnormally sharp.

There was standard Anti-Skill equipment inside her bag.

After Yomikawa left, both of them, who had used up all the resources in the bathtub, finally reached a truce.

“Damn it, the water’s now only at knee level…”

“There’s already not enough water to kick, says Misaka as Misaka will not give up, and will use all sorts of methods to accomplish her aim.”

“Stop kicking the water already. Did you forget that I’m still severely injured!?”

“Come to think of it, your hair grows really fast; there’s no sign of any operation scars, says Misaka as Misaka is impressed. Using the electric signals inside the human body to promote hair growth, that’s foul play, says Misaka as Misaka can’t help but be enthusiastic about the wonders of the human body.”

“No matter how impressive it is, it can’t grow back the scars on the cranium!”

“Splash, spin, kick water, kick water!”

“…”

“If Yomikawa knew how Misaka wasted so much water, she would immediately start scolding, says Misaka as Misaka can’t help but shudder in fear. Luckily, Yomikawa won’t be coming back to the hospital today, says Misaka as Misaka feels relieved.”

“Huh? What did she say to you?”

“About that, it didn’t come from Yomikawa herself, says Misaka as Misaka—”

CHAPTER 3

Hiding Lit Debris.

"Remnant"

Part 1

Tokiwadai Middle School had a dormitory both inside and outside the School Garden.

Shirai Kuroko and Misaka Mikoto's room was in the dormitory outside.

"Gack… ah…"

Dragging herself to the back of the dormitory, Shirai nearly vomited blood. She was trying to force herself to swallow the remaining blood in her mouth and move forward. She had to bandage herself up first, but her body didn't obey her commands. Her Teleport ability couldn't be controlled well due to the pain, making it almost impossible to use.

Her right shoulder, left flank, right thigh, right shin.

The many sharp metal needles stabbed into several parts of her body continued to tear the cloth on the clothes into the wounds. For every step she took, the magical feeling of the skin and clothes rubbing against each other would be ingrained into her mind with the pain.

The shriveled schoolbag now felt like it weighed as much as a dumbbell.

Shirai understood that she had lost much strength and felt rather uncomfortable about it; a chill flowed down her abdomen.

Arriving at the back of the dormitory, Shirai noticed a set of windows, confirming that the lights in her room weren't on.

(That's good… Onee-sama… isn't back… yet…)

Shirai weakly smiled and again regained her concentration.

In such a pathetic state, she definitely couldn't go through the front door. Shirai Kuroko endured the pain strongly, trembling and anxious, trying to make her mental calculations and teleport directly into her room.

In an instant, she couldn't feel any gravity.

The feeling of using teleportation, to put it nicely, was to float lightly in the air; to put it bluntly, it was a feeling of no reliance, being on one's own. It was like taking a roller coaster ride, the intense sense of nervousness was moving up her stomach.

"…Ugh!"

Shirai safely landed inside a pitch black room. She didn't turn on the lights, just wandered around the room, looking for a first-aid box and a spare set of clothes. As for underwear, she would just wear the one that she was wore; it would save some time. She opened her bag and pulled out the paper bag that she had gotten from the lingerie shop.

Shirai held onto that pile of things as she moved into the bathroom. The bathroom had no windows, and there was not even a single sight of light; the place was in complete darkness. Shirai closed the door, feeling for the buttons. The white light of the sunlight illuminated the narrow bathroom.

"Ah… ugh…!"

Her two hands being weak, all the stuff in her hands tumbled out. Shirai inadvertently leaned her back against the wall, the needle pierced against the side of her abdomen, slammed into the wall, sending Shirai in shock as if she was electrocuted, losing her balance and falling onto the ground. She felt all sorts of pain all over.

(August… 21st…)

Though her mind was still in chaos due to confusion, Shirai still continued to sit on the floor, rummaging through her brain. Why did that woman ask her if there was anything unusual that happened on the 21st of August?

(It's true… that Onee-sama… came back very late… and… it was the day when that gentleman suddenly came to our dorm…)

Thinking about it, other memories continued to swell up in her brain.

(That gentleman… he left after some time… that's right, Onee-sama's stuffed bear toy was taken away from under her bed. Also, there was a strong gust of wind that blew on the streets for no apparent reason, and there were even witnesses outside the train carriage park who said that there was a huge explosion and blinding flash…)

Finally, Shirai remembered the rumor that had circulated around after that day.

Shirai lifted her head.

(According to an unconfirmed report, the strongest Level 5 in Academy City was beaten by someone…)

In order to prevent any unnecessary commotion from taking place, the board chairman of Academy City had immediately ordered that information regarding that incident be controlled. Thus, Shirai didn't know who had defeated the strongest Level 5.

The huge explosion, flash, the wind level that exceeded M7, the carriage park that people assumed was a stage, it was like a baptism of explosion. Anti-Skill had been in charge of the repairs, but Shirai once assisted as a member of Judgment. At that moment, everyone had said the same thing.

The destruction had been truly unbelievable.

The one said to be the strongest Level 5 in Academy City was definitely not a bluff.

However…

For the opponent to still stand upright even after facing the attack of a Level 5, it was really unbelievable.

(Also…)

Shirai herself had privately gotten another set of information.

(…Maybe, when those two espers fought, Onee-sama was around.)

Because Shirai Kuroko had seen something.

At the carriage park, where a large number of crates had been destroyed, with all sorts of stuff scattered all over the place, in such a messy place, no one would especially notice a coin. Well, besides Shirai.

Picking it up, Shirai had believed it even more.

It had been a rough metal game coin.

It had also been the same game coin used by a certain girl when she used her railgun. At that moment, Shirai's thought process was interrupted due to tremendous pain. The 21st of August was definitely not an ordinary day, but Shirai didn't understand what that had to do with this incident.

(Anyway, let's settle the wounds first.)

She used her fingertips to gently touch the corkscrew that was stabbed into her right shoulder. A large spiral metal thing would definitely rip her muscles apart if she pulled it.

“Such irony… my ability would be useful in this situation.”

Using her teleportation ability, the corkscrew drilled into her right shoulder vanished into thin air and appeared before Shirai. The weapon that lost its support landed on the floor, creating a crisp sound.

Blood gushed out from the wound.

The object blocking the wound had been removed, thus there was even more blood loss.

The reason why Shirai hadn’t dared to pull out the metal needles and corkscrew was because she couldn’t stop the blood loss.

“…!”

In an instant, her vision became blurry, and everything became giddy. Shirai immediately shook her head, regaining her concentration. She stared at the corkscrew on the floor that was stained with blood, and her jaw dropped.

(A corkscrew from Sheffield, and a Majolica handle… ignoring where this was created, the history, the traditions, the thoughts and the beliefs completely, this is really messy. Seems like I’ve really met a dangerous client.)

Shirai again used the same teleport method to teleport away the metal needles that were stuck in the side of her abdomen and heel, and at the same time, used the phone to call Uiharu Kazari.

“Hello, hello, this is Uiharu. Shirai-san, I’ve already done what you instructed…Wah! You’re in pain! I can hear from your breathing!”

In actual fact, Shirai had called Uiharu before she headed back to the dormitory. Besides notifying her that she had lost and the luggage bag had been stolen, she requested Uiharu to check up on information regarding the Tree Diagram, the identity of the teleporter, and to predict the escape route. However, it was really difficult to trace where a teleporter moved, so the last part was just up to whether they could do it.

At the same time, Shirai had requested that Uiharu not mention the fact that she was injured. If she didn’t do that, she would likely be obstructed.

Judgment members were all students, and Anti-Skill were all teaching staff members. So the important jobs were handled by Anti-Skill. There were two reasons for that. The first was that they couldn’t allow children to be endangered. The second was that they didn’t want the children to have the immense power that could solve those dangerous situations.

Once the higher-ups knew that Shirai was injured to such an extent, they would likely prevent her from taking further action. But the teleporter had mentioned the words “Ace of Tokiwadai”, and “Misaka Mikoto”, which bothered Shirai.

Thus, Shirai definitely could not back off and just ignore it.

“Are you really alright? Having hot-blooded women fighting is not a trendy thing now, you know.”

“Forget…about that…what have you discovered?”

Shirai tossed the blood-stained metal needles onto the floor, twisting her thoroughly injured body, removing every single piece of clothing. The thin wool jacket used in the summer, her short-sleeved shirt. She then unhooked her skirt, removing it. At that moment, Shirai saw that her underwear was also covered in blood, her jaw dropping in shock. She then removed the underwear and tossed it onto the floor. When she had first gotten into her room, she hadn’t removed her shoes, and at that moment, she removed both her socks and shoes at the same time. She even removed the leather straps wrapped around her thighs that contained the metal needles, revealing a naked body. Shirai investigated her wounds one by one.

“First, regarding the teleporter. Searching through the records, including you, there are 58 such espers in Academy City. As expected of an ability which requires the calculation and manipulation of the eleventh dimension, there aren’t a lot of people who know how to use it.”

“Is there anyone similar to what I described?”

Shirai used her blood-stained hand to reach for the rectangular first-aid box.

“There are nineteen people who can move multiple things in one go, including you.” Uiharu paused before continuing. “According to what you described, there are three people who fit the criteria, but only one of them doesn’t have an alibi. I can trace the other two people through the surveillance cameras here.”

Without hesitation, Uiharu came to a conclusion.

“Second year at Kirigaoka Girls’ Academy, Musujime Awaki. Like you, she’s a teleporter, but the conditions are a bit different.”

“It’s definitely somewhat different… She can teleport ten men and use them as her shield. So the total mass should be about seven hundred kilograms. It’s really different from my own ability.”

Shirai didn't deny that she was at a disadvantage. It was because she believed that she could find an escape route through it.

Opening the first-aid box, Shirai took out a soft tube that looked like toothpaste. She unscrewed the cap, squeezed out the paste-like substance inside and applied it over her wound. It was first-aid medication used for treating external wounds, and at the same time, it had the abilities to disinfect, clot blood, and heal the wound. The inventor was an amazing medical researcher called "Heaven Canceller", but it was hard for ordinary folks to get it. Most external wounds could be treated by it, but in some rare and special circumstances, it wouldn't work. If it didn't work, then it was time for the doctor.

"Besides this point, there are also other notable differences. Your ability is to send things that you touch to another place, which is, using your own body as point O, and teleporting the item to location A, but Musujime's ability is to shift an item far away from one point to another, which is to move the item from point A to point B. In other words, the start point of her ability isn't fixed, different from you."

"No wonder… That woman called her ability 'Move Point'…"

Shirai gently bit onto her lips, thinking through in her head.

At first, Musujime had really moved many things that she had not touched with her own two hands. However, she had not teleported Shirai Kuroko herself. If she could have done that, there would have been no need to fire anything. She would have just needed to stuff Shirai Kuroko's body into the earth in order to beat her once and for all.

"I have an interesting report over here as well. On this report, Musujime seems to be unable to teleport anyone with a similar power. This may be because a similar type of AIM diffusion field will affect Musujime's ability, but regarding this AIM diffusion ability, there is only a limited amount of research done on it, so the information has to be validated… According to this report, this phenomenon isn't limited to just Musujime. No teleporter can teleport one with a similar ability. Shirai-san, is this true?"

"No idea. This is the first time I've met an esper with the same type of power."

Then, Shirai gave a sigh.

Though it was not practically tested, it was not hard to imagine it. The teleporter had to calculate his or her own absolute coordinates on the eleventh dimension, and not the surface location on the third dimension. So once other teleporters wanted to change their own coordinates, the coordinate information in their brain would be interfered with.

"And on a non-urgent note, according to an experiment report, Musujime Awaki was injured severely in a lesson two years ago because she lost control of her power."

"…It really isn't an important report. Also, it doesn't even help us find her weakness. Really, how can a monster like her be only a Level 4?"

Shirai thought as she pulled out a tissue paper from her torn skirt, trying to wipe away the blood around her wounds. The skin that had a delicate elasticity became somewhat cooler all of a sudden.

"By just using the right techniques, her technique might not even lose to a Level 5. Maybe she might even know of some weaknesses that we don't know about."

On the other side of the phone, Uiharu casually said. "Next, regarding the Tree Diagram…"

"I really wished that this is just a big fat lie that Musujime made up, but it seems like it's actually true."

After applying the rubber-like paste to her wounds, Shirai bandaged the wounds. Once the bandages touched her skin, Shirai again felt herself sweating a bit.

"No, I can't find any important information regarding the Tree Diagram being destroyed. In name, the Tree Diagram is still floating in satellite orbit. Academy City did actually fire a space shuttle last month, but the space shuttle's mission had nothing to do with the Tree Diagram."

"What's going on?"

Shirai frowned and stopped bandaging.

She remembered the photo that Musujime had shown her when she fell in the alley.

The satellite that had broken into several fragments.

Uiharu's voice sounded a bit distressed as well.

"I don't know whether this seems like good news…another group of our colleagues found the victim who stole that luggage bag. He is a smuggler, and only knows that the client is from District 23, but he didn't know about the satellite thing. We have already used a telepath to confirm his memories; he wasn't lying."

A smuggler.

(Maybe he's an expert in the trade,) Shirai considered. After the luggage bag had been stolen, he had tried to chase down the group of robbers, so it could be seen that he had some determination in his job…

"In other words, District 23 wants to send the item inside this luggage bag to some research institute in Academy City, so they hired a smuggler for the job. However, the

luggage bag was stolen by Musujime and her gang. Though the group that was robbed wants to get the item back, this is classified information, so they can't disclose it so easily, and can only get it back through the best of their ability…is that what happened?"

Shirai slowly swung her bandaged limbs, checking if there was any blood that was flowing out of them. The quick-dry rubber-like medicinal paste seemed to have completely healed the wounds.

"Though it's rather interesting to see where District 23 is sending this thing to, the main problem is the identities of those robbers. I guess that the culprit behind this is an external organization that's antagonistic to Academy City. Of course, excluding what you described, I guess that the internal strife within different groups of Academy City would require such a crude method as stealing."

"…An antagonistic external organization. How did Musujime get involved with those kind of people? Who the heck is she?"

"Musujime normally applies for leave in Kirigaoka High School, but all her leaves are special absences. Weird, isn't it? She's not even a member of Judgment."

"In other words, her work may be antagonistic to our Judgment duties?"

Uiharu lowered her volume and said, "According to an unidentified report, she's the guide to that windowless building."

"…The main base of the board chairman of Academy City?"

It was a movie-like rumor, but the highest leader of Academy City was living in a special building that could even absorb and withstand a nuclear bomb attack. There were no windows or even entrances to the building, and they could only teleport in through the help of a guide.

If the rumor was true (or even more exaggerating than what the rumors suggested), that meant that Musujime may know things that ordinary people didn't know about, and had the opportunity to meet people of all sorts of unique backgrounds. Maybe that was why she had been chosen by the outside world.

"Though we don't know why Musujime wants to do this, let's assume that she linked up secretly with the external organization and planned this robbery. The thing inside the luggage bag…she called it Remnant. And now she has it…"

"After this, she'll hand this thing over to the people from this external organization."

"Can you check out where she's moving?"

Shirai reached out her hand and wanted to grab hold of the underwear that she wanted to change into, only to realize that her hands were stained in blood. Thus, she first

headed towards the sink, washed her hands and thought calmly. A girl with twin pigtails putting a phone between her face and her shoulder, fully naked, and washing her hands in the bathroom. Such a sight was truly laughable.

"That's hard. There's no need for a person to move down the roads when he or she teleports. You also know that the security camera system in Academy City has blind spots." Uiharu paused for a while, then continued, "Ah, though she wasn't caught on camera at all, this might be a clue as well."

"What do you mean?"

Shirai wiped her hands dry with a towel, put on her underwear and asked. With both hands, she pulled her panties up to her waist… only to feel that she had pulled it a bit too much, and pulled the underwear down a bit.

"Since she's travelling around in blind spots, we just need to investigate all the blind corners. Compared to the whole of Academy City, the total area of all the blind spots is rather small."

"…You're saying this rather calmly, you know. I'm now a critically injured person here… It hurts!"

Shirai used both hands to hook the back of her bra, but that action seemed to stretch her muscles, as she could feel a sharp pain on the side of her abdomen immediately.

(I should have worn a front-hook bra or just an undershirt instead.)

She frowned as she felt her abdomen. Luckily, the wound hadn't reopened.

Shirai Kuroko checked how she looked now that she was wearing her underwear.

The design was thought to be sleazy by Misaka Mikoto, and in fact, Shirai was really distraught. However, Shirai herself didn't care about the design of the underwear because to her, that underwear wasn't meant to be shown off, but were things meant to be worn on her own body. To her, the first condition of choosing underwear was how comfortable it was. The cute and childish designs were normally thicker and had inferior quality, and the rubbing of a sports bra against her skin while she was exercising would distract her. She even felt that instead of wearing such lingerie, she might as well not wear anything at all (Maybe this was why Shirai herself needed to concentrate fully when she used her ability.) Having a different opinion from Mikoto on that matter caused Shirai Kuroko to feel rather sad.

After putting on her underwear, Shirai strapped the leather straps full of needles back onto her thighs. As there was no set of pre-prepared needles, she could only use the disinfecting alcohol to wipe the needles that had pierced her, and place them back into the leather strap.



“Shirai-san. If she wants to use the blind spots to get outside Academy City, including the surface and the underground streets, there are only several streets for her to choose. So once we check through all these routes…”

“…Shhh!”

Shirai felt that someone else seemed to be close by and immediately ended the call. At that moment, outside the thin bathroom door, someone walked into the room.

She stared at the entrance of the bathroom and realized that she had forgot to lock the door, and immediately moved to lock it. With a click sound, the sound of metal pieces hammering each other could be heard rather audibly.

“…Kuroko?”

The moment Shirai heard that, she knew who the voice belonged to. Though it was just a rough and short voice that came from behind the door, Shirai was certain that the person speaking was Misaka Mikoto. Even if Misaka Mikoto was just breathing, Shirai believed that she could tell it was Mikoto just by hearing it.

“Are you bathing? Since you came back, why didn’t you turn on the lights? Why are you hiding inside a dark room?”

The voice came from beside the door, scaring Shirai. She definitely could not let Mikoto see her like that. She couldn’t leave even a trace of suspicion. Misaka Mikoto’s overprotective nature may be even more severe than what she herself expected.

“Sa-saving electricity, Onee-sama. Ol’ gentle Kuroko wants to reduce the effect of global warming.”

“Oh…but Academy City’s main source of electricity are wind generators, aren’t they unrelated to carbon dioxide? Our secondary source of power is solar power, so for electricity, we don’t have such a problem, do we? Unless we’re talking about turning on the air-con, right?”

“Ah, I forgot about it. I thought that I could use it as an excuse to lure Onee-sama into the atmosphere of this dark room… oh my, Onee-sama. As a posh lady, how can you let out a ‘ugh!’ sound?”

Shirai laughed weakly as she leaned her back against the door of the bathroom.

Through the thin door, a vibration could be felt. The person outside seemed to have done the same thing.

Shirai felt the vibration and started to recall.

"*—Don't you think that this is too coincidental? After stealing the luggage bag, these men were caught in a traffic jam, it's like it was pre-planned. The electricity flow to the traffic lights was lost…haven't you thought of the reason? Don't you know what kind of power the Ace of Tokiwadai has?*"

Shirai Kuroko knew very well that something was happening.

"*—Misaka Mikoto is so pitiful. Her nightmare was finally ended with much difficulty because someone destroyed the Tree Diagram.*"

Shirai Kuroko also knew that Misaka Mikoto was heavily involved in this.

"*—And now everyone else wants to repair it. Once this gimmick is repaired, the experiment will likely continue. Hm, I can't really say that I don't understand her feelings.*"

Shirai also understood that though Mikoto was involved in this troublesome situation, she would never ever want to show herself being troubled or frustrated in front of Shirai.

By linking all the events together, Shirai could see it. Mikoto was clearly troubled by some issues, but she was unwilling to admit them to Shirai, and yet accepted someone else's help. For whatever reason, Mikoto just wanted Shirai to not get involved in this. It was like a circular perimeter being set up to keep Shirai out.

No matter how much Shirai worked, how much she struggled, Misaka Mikoto wouldn't be happy about it.

If Misaka Mikoto was to see that Shirai was to be involved in her own personal matter, she would definitely be displeased.

Even so…

Shirai still hoped that she could help Mikoto, to ease Mikoto's burdens. Even if Mikoto was to be completely ignorant of that, it was alright. Even if all the credit went to someone else, it was alright. Shirai wished. With her thoroughly injured body, looking at the blood-stained clothes, she wished.

Shirai was completely unaware of what was going on inside.

Mikoto was hiding everything from Shirai like a sealed bottle, thus Shirai was unable to guess what was going on.

However, Shirai wanted to solve the problem.

Shirai wanted to pull Mikoto out from the bloody all-for-grabs world.

Once all the problems were settled, Shirai wanted to smile together and have fun together with Mikoto like today after school.

Shirai Kuroko silently made that resolution.

In order to accomplish that wish…

(I won't care even if I have to lie to you seriously, Onee-sama. No matter whether you wish for me to do this or not.)

"Onee-sama, where did you go just now?"

"Hm? I went to look for this little decoration that I didn't buy before. I've looked for it quite a bit recently, but I haven't seen one that suits me. Right now, I just came back to get something, so I'm going out again. Oh yeah, don't expect me to bring whatever gifts back to you, Kuroko."

Shirai thought that that was a sweet lie. If she made a ruckus and said that she wanted to go, how would Mikoto react?

(Onee-sama just said "recently"… This means that she had been planning this for quite some time. "Look for this little decoration"… A precision instrument aid can be considered a decoration… Too easy for me to see through it.)

Shirai weakly laughed, but that didn't stop her. She just said a sentence. The words that Mikoto had said at evening, Shirai digested it and returned it back to Mikoto.

"But let's hope that it doesn't rain. The weather report nowadays is rather inaccurate."

"…"

In an instant, Mikoto seemed to have taken a deep sigh. After maintaining that silence for a while, she seemed to have lowered down her guard, her tone sounding somewhat softer.

"Yeah. Thanks for your concern. I'll try and get back as soon as possible."

After those words, the presence outside the door vanished. The girl outside the door had already left the door and the room.

The shutting of the door could be heard.

"Now then…"

Shirai rested for a while, not waiting to even put on her own clothes. She just hastily grabbed her change of summer uniform and redialed the number. There was still something that she needed to ask Uiharu about.

“Hello? That’s right. Can you tell me where that woman ran off to?”

Part 2

After cleaning the blood stains in the bathroom, and taking care of the tattered clothes, Shirai again used her Teleport ability to get to the back alley behind the girls dormitory.

The time was 8:30 PM.

It had only been two hours from the time when she had separated from Mikoto after the shopping trip. Shirai was rather surprised by it.

At that time, almost all modes of transport in Academy City had ceased operations. In order to prevent students from venturing outside, all the buses and trams were coordinated with the last school’s leaving time. Right now, there were only private vehicles belonging to those of teachers, university students, taxis, trucks, and other forms of industrial vehicles.

The scene of a traffic jam had completely vanished.

As there were already very few vehicles on the road, the roads were empty.

Shirai took a deep breath. The air already had the scent of night.

“Ah, Shirai-san, there is something important you need to note,” A voice came from the phone. “Musujime Awaki doesn’t seem to be able to teleport her own body continuously. I found some records in the library. Shirai-san, I said before that Musujime lost control of her powers during a lesson two years ago and was severely injured, didn’t I?”

“So what?”

“After that, Musujime went for several counseling sessions in school. That incident seemed to have caused some sort of trauma in her. From then on, she was unable to get good marks on any test that required her to teleport her own body, and there are even cases when she fell sick from overexerting herself. It’s like every time she teleports, it’s a gamble of her own life. In other words…”

“Her mental condition will immediately worsen if she teleports continuously, right?” Shirai bit her lips and said, “Now that I think about it, Musujime didn’t teleport her own body at all during the battle. In fact, if she could teleport around on her own, there would be no need to ask for any special help from the outside world; it’d be faster for her to do it on her own. Teleporters can move fast and ignore any walls, paths or distances, so it’s impossible to catch us using ordinary means.”

The strength of Shirai’s own ability would differ according to her mood each day. If Musujime was affected by her own emotional scar, her control over her own ability would very likely decrease.

Shirai then had a thought.

(Come to think of it, her ability is so powerful. Maybe it’s because of that emotional scar that she’s stuck on the same Level as me…?)

Shirai carried some mixed feelings as she teleported. Every eighty meters she moved, her feet would land on the floor, she would aim at the next point and continue to teleport.

Since Shirai was already covered in wounds, and it was difficult for her to even walk, the ability to quickly teleport around at will was at its most useful.

“Musujime is stronger than me. She can move things without touching them. But on the downside, her methods of calculations are even more troublesome than mine. Though I can only move things that I touch, I don’t have to calculate the original coordinates before moving.”

“That’s… right. So… your calculation time… is shorter. Oh yeah… if Musujime doesn’t use… Move Point… then she’ll move…”

Because of teleportation, the content of the phone call was interrupted. Shirai was listening carefully, but before Uiharu even finished speaking, Shirai knew where to go.

The sound of thunder could be heard from afar.

Shirai Kuroko looked up at the sky.

“Don’t tell me it’s…”

The time when the shops and transportation operated in Academy City was coordinated with the schools’ timing. Once it was slightly dark, the lights on the roads would vanish one by one, so compared to the metropolis in other major cities in the outside world, the light intensity was a lot less.

Right now, the stars were covering the sky, and the weather looked good; there were no thunderclouds that could possibly cause thunder.

If so, what was with that high voltage roar?

“Shirai-san, I got a new report that there is a large-scale esper battle somewhere in District 7, and it’s right on the path where Musujime’s predicted escape route is!”

Another thunder roared, covering Uiharu’s voice, and it also interrupted the phone’s reception.

Shirai would definitely not mistake that “voice”.

“Onee-sama!!”

Shirai shouted and changed her direction. Though her appearing in front of Mikoto would basically be against what she had intended, but on thinking that Mikoto may be attacked, Shirai didn’t have a second option.

She continued to teleport, jumping around spaces.

The sparks that could terrify anyone continued to rumble about in the air like an air raid.

On the roads in the night, all the people, who were older than Shirai, stared at her in surprise.

Everything of everything seemed to be pushing Shirai forward. Just as she was about to reach her destination, Shirai stopped her teleport. Following a deafening thunder roar, Shirai moved to the back of a building through blind corners.

Like a murder detective, Shirai poked her head out of the building.

At that moment, she witnessed something amazing.

Part 3

It was a battlefield.

It was a battlefield created by a single girl.

The location was right beside a certain building. If Shirai remembered correctly… on August 31st, there was an accident where some steel pillars collapsed. The steel pillars had been removed, and the remaining parts had been investigated thoroughly; now they were on the process of reconstruction.

A small bus was lying sideways in front of the entrance of the building.

The glass was shattered, and all the items in the bus were scattered. But there was no one inside.

The people who were originally sitting inside the bus had all escaped into the building. It seemed that they wanted to look for some form of protection from the metal pillars.

There were about thirty men and women. Some were armed with guns, and some were espers of Academy City.

(That gun… I remember clearly! Those guys that I knocked unconscious were also using those guns…!)

Looking out from a shadowy area, Shirai couldn't help but feel surprised. Not only were the guns that they were using the same, even their posture was the same.

In contrast, Misaka Mikoto was just standing openly beside the flipped bus.

(That woman mentioned that Onee-sama has a deep connection with that briefcase, and now Onee-sama is going to fight with that organization full of people holding those kind of guns. This means…)

According to the situation, those people should belong to the organization that wanted to export the Remnant out. As for why espers would betray Academy City, well, no one knew.

At that moment, Shirai saw another familiar face.

Musujime Awaki.

There were no obstacles in front of Mikoto at all. There was clearly a small bus flipped beside her, but Mikoto didn't intend to hide behind it. Based on common sense, facing several men armed with long range weapons with that attitude would be too daring.

But the Railgun's power could defy any common sense.

A flash was emitted from Misaka Mikoto's fingertip.

A small coin was shot out at three times the speed of sound, cutting the thick and heavy pillars. The armed men were terrified by the shrapnel that was falling due to the pillars being shot. The espers who were standing in a higher story were aiming at Mikoto's head, but lost footing due to the pillars breaking and fell down. The railgun slammed into twenty steel pillars before slamming into another building, causing a crack in the wall before the energy was completely lost.



Some of the flabbergasted men tried to back away, but Mikoto's lightning wouldn't let them off so easily. The blue and white sparks that were emitting from her forehead hit a steel pillar, and the electricity instantly flowed through the entire building. All the men who touched the pillars jumped in shock. The tower had seemingly become a steel cage, as some of the electricity shot inwards from every steel pillar, electrocuting some people who weren't touching the pillars as well and causing them to collapse to the ground.

The remaining espers who survived due to various reasons tried to counterattack, but it was too late. The distance between them was too great. The vacuum blades that the Aero Shooter esper shot out vanished upon contact with the railgun. The numerous wooden sticks that the Telekinesis esper fired exploded under the high voltage. And the esper who had a similar type of electrical power to Mikoto fainted in fear.

It was an overwhelming victory.

That one-sided battle seemed to only prove why a Level 5 had the right to be called a Level 5.

This was the power of only seven people in Academy City.

In Shirai's eyes, the most unbelievable thing was that such destructive power still didn't kill anyone. If she didn't consider her own attack, the enemy's movements and the consequences of the destruction, she wouldn't be able to hold back like that. Though she held back very hard, the rag tag group of several people were completely defeated.

Shirai recalled that once she had finished treating her wounds and had returned back to the room, she had noticed that the coin box on the short cupboard at the bed was open. That coin box was shaped like a safety deposit box, and there were arcade coins inside which could be used as railgun bullets.

"Come out, you coward. It's despicable of you to use your own comrades as a shield."

From the beginning up until then, Mikoto hadn't moved one step. She just stood there, looked at the remains of the battlefield, and spoke in a contemptuous tone.

"Why say it in such a disgusting manner? This is what I call not letting my comrades sacrifice themselves without any meaning."

The voice that replied to Mikoto was also rather still.

Musujime Awaki. She was holding onto a white luggage bag with one hand, smiling, appearing at the third level formed by the steel pillars. There were several men who were electrocuted and unconscious, and those people were instantly teleported to her, blocking the electrical voltage. Her right hand continued to swing a military flashlight.

"You're really naïve. Do you think that you have beaten the Railgun just because you avoided forty seconds of attack?"

“Nope, I’m not so naïve, you know. You can level this place to dust if you’re serious, but so what?”

Musujime secured the luggage bag on the steel structure and then sat on it.

“Come to think of it, you’re rather impatient. Last time, you used to just play the role of a spy. Though you have immense power, you never used the power of the railgun and violence to interfere with the experiment. Are you that afraid that Remnant would be rebuilt? Are you afraid that the Tree Diagram will be successfully rebuilt and working throughout the entire world? Are you afraid that a few facilities will restart the experiment?”

“…Shut your mouth up. You can’t even back your claims.”

Mikoto let out some sparks from her bangs.

Musujime was still sitting on the luggage bag, swinging the military flashlight around as if she was waving hello.

(…)

Shirai was standing inside the building, turning her head around and peeking outside, confirming again that the enemy that Mikoto was facing was Musujime. Though she didn’t know what was going on, both of them looked like they were going to draw swords anytime.

Shirai remembered what Musujime had said a while back.

“—Didn’t you know? To be used like this while not knowing anything… no way? Tokiwadai’s Railgun shouldn’t be that sort of person.”

(Seems like… this isn’t the first time that they met…)

From the way both of them were speaking, it didn’t seem like they were only meeting for the first time. Maybe they had been enemies for quite some time, and it was only now that Shirai met both of them together.

(To face off against Onee-sama that long, and yet she isn’t knocked out?)

Though it was a face-off, it didn’t seem like it was a direct conflict. With Musujime’s personality, she would try and attack from a blind spot (Of course, Shirai’s knowledge on Musujime’s personality was limited).

But no matter what, to go against the Railgun and still stand unscathed, it was mystifying.

Shirai was speculating over what action she should take. Her ability couldn't match Musujime, so she couldn't just rush into battle recklessly. No matter what, she couldn't let Mikoto get hurt because of her.

"Hoho, why do you care so much about the weak? Those things that you treated as your babies were originally created for the experiment, so what's wrong with them being destroyed according to the plan?"

"Are you joking? Or do you really think that way?"

"What am I joking about? Anyway, you are fighting for yourself regardless, so you're like me, huh? For your own benefit, using your own power to hurt others in your favorite way. What's wrong with that? Not using the things that you have is a weird thing, isn't it?"

The woman who had used her companions as a shield and continued to laugh like nothing had happened said that in a mocking tone.

Basically, everyone was using violence for their own benefit.

Since both of them were of the same type, what did one side have that allowed her to rebuke another?

"That's right."

In contrast, Mikoto just slightly raised her jaw.

Not just her bangs, her entire body was emitting blue and white sparks.

"I am mad. I'm so mad that the blood vessels in my brain are going to explode. That's right, I'm angry that the remnants of the Tree Diagram were found, and some people are trying to steal it for selfish reasons, and the possibility that the experiment that everyone worked so hard to stop may be restarted. I'm really angry about that, so angry that I want to sneak around and destroy all these groups thoroughly."

Mikoto continued to glare at Musujime Awaki intently.

"However, I'm more angry about something else."

At that moment, Shirai was thinking of how she could avoid hindering Mikoto and assist her. But on hearing Mikoto's words, Shirai's thoughts were attracted.

"…That idiot, she thought that I wouldn't discover it? Her name's not in the 'returned' registry, the room's in a mess, the first-aid box is missing, the sound of someone moaning in agony from behind the bathroom… the conditions are so obvious, how can I miss them…?"

Shirai took a deep breath.

She understood the reason why Mikoto was so angry.

“Getting my kouhai involved is the one thing that’ll get me really agitated. That idiot didn’t think of finding a doctor, and even when she’s injured, she isn’t willing to retreat, not caring about her own safety, and even saying those words that’ll make me worried! How can I have such a stupid kouhai, this makes me really angry!”

Deep inside, Shirai’s heart trembled.

Mikoto’s words would probably confuse Musujime. And Tokiwadai’s Railgun didn’t know that Shirai was beside her.

Then, who on earth was Mikoto trying to talk to? Mikoto hadn’t told Shirai anything about that.

She just wanted to stall by using a stupid reason like “finding a little decoration”.

She used ambiguous words like “the weather may turn bad” several times to warn Shirai.

She normally acted alone.

The old Misaka Mikoto, and the current Misaka Mikoto standing there, what sort of beliefs did they have?

“That’s right! I’m angry because of my selfishness! I’m angry that this perfectly stupid kouhai, and the damned woman in front of me who hurt that kouhai, and myself, who got involved in this!!”

Mikoto roared in agony, the voice sounding as if someone had stabbed her in her own chest.

Mikoto’s only wish was to prevent both sides from fighting because of the Tree Diagram.

“Since the trigger of this incident was that experiment, I have some responsibilities. If it wasn’t for me, that stupid kouhai wouldn’t be hurt, and you wouldn’t have to hurt that stupid kouhai! If so, I have the duty and right to stop you!!”

Shirai understood now.

Why after Shirai and Musujime had their battle, that Mikoto would choose to settle the problem alone.

Because she wasn’t Shirai’s ally, nor was she Musujime’s enemy.

In order to prevent the people involved from taking action, Misaka Mikoto could only choose not to work with anyone.

She could only settle this alone.

She could only face that nightmare of hers.

“I want to settle all this. You people shouldn’t have gotten involved because of my experiment.”

Dangling her leg and sitting on the luggage bag, Musujime Awaki laughed.

“You’re too kind. You didn’t create the Silicorandum. You have no need to get into battle, you just need to stay put and be a victim.”

“No, it’s our experiment that led you to the battlefield. No matter whether it’s the Level 6 Shift project or the earlier Radio Noise project, if this is the case, I won’t sit around and do nothing.”

(Level 6 Shift? Radio Noise?)

Those two mysterious terms confused Shirai as if she was in some sort of white fog.

However, Musujime understood what she was saying.

“It’s not your experiment, but the experiment about the Sisters and the strongest esper, right? Of course… those comrades of mine who were taken out have already told you the reason why I’m involved in this battle. If so, you’re an esper, and you understand… that I can’t fail here. No matter who I sacrifice, no matter the means, I have to escape.”

Musujime’s last words sounded very serious.

Shirai hid behind the corner of the building, mentally calculating the largest movable distance that Musujime could do.

Mikoto slightly narrowed her eyes and said, “…Can you really use that weak Level 4 ability of yours to escape my lightning strike?”

“Oh my, the speed of lightning is as fast as light, so it’s true that I can’t avoid it on sight, but so what? Once I see the signs and move quickly…”

“It’s not possible.”

Mikoto firmly interrupted her words.

“This isn’t the first time I’m fighting you. I’m sure you know that your ability has a weakness. Though you can move several items, you can’t move your own body. I can

understand that. If for some reason, you accidentally teleported yourself into a dangerous area like the wall of a building or the middle of a road, everything would be over. For someone like you who would even sacrifice others to protect yourself, even if it's the slightest hint of danger, you might exclude the thought, right?"

"..."

"Why aren't you saying anything? Did you think that I didn't discover it? You normally use your Move Point to teleport your companions' bodies or various blockades in front of me to block my sight, yet you would escape on foot. No matter how slow I can be, I can tell that something isn't right." Mikoto coldly sighed. "Also, the situation is already disadvantageous to you, so normally, you would be running away, right? Don't tell me you have some tricks that you haven't used yet? Anyone can tell that you are at your wits' end."

Musujime Awaki calmly laughed.

But anyone with good eyesight could tell that all the fingers on her hands were trembling unnaturally.

"Maybe the recorded incident in the library is one of the reasons, huh? You can teleport anyone or anything else, but you can't do the same thing to your own body with the same attitude, huh? For instance, when you're teleporting your own body, you would re-check your calculations several times over, causing a two to three seconds delay in your actions." Mikoto paused for a while, then continued, "How many lightning strikes can I fire in three seconds?"

"...You can even check this sort of thing in the library catalog?"

"Don't make me repeat the same thing over again. Maybe the library isn't that clear, but I can guess it through your expression and your battle style."

On hearing that, Musujime Awaki revealed a radiant smile.

She stood on the steel structure with both feet, her body leaving the luggage bag that she was sitting on, gracefully standing up. The front of the military flashlight that she was waving slightly was now fixated on a point.

"However... teleporting something else beside my own body won't make me hesitate one bit.

After saying that, about ten bodies appeared before Musujime. They were all people who could be rendered unconscious by Mikoto's attack. There were adults and children. There were people from inside Academy City and outside.

The ten bodies formed a human shield.

However…

“That shield is full of holes!”

Mikoto’s bangs let loose those sparks without mercy. The human body wasn’t flat like a metal plate, so no matter how they were packed up, there would be holes between them. Mikoto’s electricity could accurately pass through those holes.

A shot of a hundred million high power voltage spears.

Just as the electricity was about to shoot out from Mikoto’s bangs, Musujime, who was standing on the other side of the shield, laughed and said, “Guess!”

Her tone was unusually cheerful.

“Among these people, how many of them are ordinary citizens who are completely unrelated to us?”

“What?”

Mikoto panicked and hurriedly held back her power.

Mikoto hesitated and didn’t fire.

Three seconds passed.

After that, Musujime Awaki disappeared together with the luggage bag.

The people who were floating in mid-air collapsed onto the ground, and every one of them was unconscious. They were all the people that Mikoto had taken down. Musujime hadn’t used a single ordinary citizen as a shield.

“Cheh!”

Mikoto’s jaw dropped as she frantically looked around. As one might expect, Musujime hadn’t teleported to a place she could see. As it was point-to-point movement, there were no traceable paths. That was the toughest thing about a teleporter.

In an instant, Shirai saw Mikoto’s expression.

Mikoto most probably didn’t expect anyone to be looking at her. If not, she wouldn’t be looking so distraught that she was about to cry.

Shirai Kuroko was hiding behind the building, leaning her back against the wall, staring at the empty front.

(It’s my turn now, Onee-sama.)

As a fellow teleporter, Shirai knew where she could teleport to avoid Misaka Mikoto's attack.

At the same time…

Shirai knew that, after escaping the Railgun's attack, the enemy would be extremely happy and relaxed.

(Sorry, Onee-sama. After your stupid kouhai heard your words, though I know how worried you are, my will to fight on to the bitter end hasn't wavered one bit.)

To be able to teleport around freely, a person able to ignore the roads and the thickness of the walls.

Only a person with similar abilities could catch her.

"Got to go, Shirai Kuroko. In order to survive, you have to go to the deepest part of the battlefield."

She took the Judgment armband and wrapped it around the sleeve of her uniform.

The next second, after reaffirming her mission, she vanished into thin air.

Between the Lines 3

(Got to hurry.)

Inside the pitch black room, a girl leapt up from her bed.

(Got to hurry, Misaka continues to remind herself of this situation of high priority.)

She looked like Misaka Mikoto, but was somewhat different. She was a clone created from Mikoto's genes, Serial Number 10032, known as Misaka Imouto.

Basically, her power was to control electricity, and could use electricity to communicate telepathically with people of similar wavelengths.

After a certain incident, she had been sent to a hospital to rehabilitate her body, and most of the other Sisters had been sent to organizations outside Academy City. There were only a few of those Sisters who had stayed in Academy City with her.

Right now, the information that the other Sisters were sending, together with the conclusion of the governing Serial Number 20001, Last Order, made Misaka Imouto very worried.

The Sisters all over the world had gathered several fragments of information. Now, with the information assembled, a startling truth was discovered.

(It needs confirmation, Misaka #10032 searches through the network and settles these memories of information in the best way possible.)

Misaka Imouto looked around before grabbing her special goggles with her right hand.

(Right now, eight countries in the world and nineteen organizations have fired space shuttles into the air to get the remains of the orbiting Tree Diagram, is this information accurate?, Misaka #10032 asks a question to an unspecified number of people.)

If that information was true, it could be seen how many people wanted the Tree Diagram to be repaired.

A race had already started for the remnant of the Tree Diagram, an essential item.

Once the world's most powerful supercomputer was repaired, the experiment may be restarted.

Before, a certain boy and a certain girl had risked their lives to stop that experiment.

(The same thing is happening in Sevilla, Misaka #10854 gives an affirmative reply.)

(They have confirmed plans to launch in Schleswig, Misaka #18770 reports.)

(It's said that Novosibirsk has already obtained parts of it, Misaka #19999 also reports.)

(Also from Novosibirsk, according to reports, they are trying to get and repair the essential core, the calculator, that's in Academy City. If there is no core, they can't repair the Tree Diagram, Misaka #20000 adds.)

Misaka Imouto extended her legs and touched the ground. Several noises, emotions and images appeared in her head. They were all the voices of the Sisters that had been sent to friendly organizations all over the world. They could use the network caused by linked telepathy to get information from 9,969 places.

(Right now, only Academy City has the Remnant that can be used to repair the Tree Diagram, Misaka #10044 concludes.)

(The fragments that the other organizations got and the ones orbiting around are useless, so Academy City ignored them, Misaka #14002 infers.)

(Cape Kennedy is thinking of the same thing, and now planning to send people to invade into Academy City to steal the Remnant, Misaka #18820 reports.)

(The group planning this operation seems to be called Asociacion de Ciencia, says Misaka as Misaka adds on. Ah, at this moment, should I call myself Misaka #20001? asks Misaka as Misaka tilts her head in confusion.)

Misaka Imouto couldn't help but grit her teeth on hearing the numerous feedback and suggestions.

All the reports were pointing to a terrifying truth.

She confirmed the same report over and over again; actually, she was hoping, no matter how small the chance may be, that it was just a misunderstanding. However, she herself didn't notice that.

"Though it's past the allowed time, it's not time to worry about this, Misaka uses an emergency excuse to assure herself."

Misaka Imouto herself wasn't wearing any pajamas or even a shirt, she was just wearing a surgical coat. She unhooked the buttons in front of her chest, revealing the white skin that didn't have any underwear covering it. The coat slipped and landed on the floor. The scene was like a girl removing her bathrobe in front of her lover. After that, she grabbed a towel and wiped her sweat away. The towel felt a bit hot as compared to normal, and it was because she was not feeling well, her body was a bit feverish, and even her skin was a bit reddish.

She quickly put on her underwear, reached back with both hands to hook her bra, buttoned up the buttons of her white short-sleeved shirt, pulled up the zipper on the side of her skirt, and stuffed her head and hands into the thin woolen summer jacket.

After that, she put on her goggles, her shoes, hastily picked up the surgical coat, folded it, put it on the bed, and did the minimal warm-up exercises. She looked at the door, shook her head, walked to the window, opened the window frame and pushed it open.

She lowered her head and looked down. It was the second level.

However, Misaka Imouto didn't care.

(Anyway, settling the Remnant inside Academy City remains top priority, Misaka #10032 concludes. That's right, no matter what, Misaka has to prevent the reparation of Tree Diagram, as Misaka thinks of the boy and the girl again. Misaka doesn't want to see their sad faces.)

Though Misaka Imouto decided it, her icy face was indicative of her helplessness.

The boy who had went out to the train yard in the middle of the night to save Misaka Imouto, who had been on the brink of death.

The boy had ignored the threats of the strongest esper in Academy City and had said those words to Misaka Imouto.

Misaka Imouto still remembered them, clearly.

Misaka Imouto shook her head that was becoming blurry due to her fever, dragging her thoughts back to reality.

Right now, every minute, every second, the situation was changing. Though the Sisters were on the sidelines, they could roughly understand the whole situation by gathering intelligence from all over the world.

She knew the situation clearly.

But Misaka Imouto and her sisters were helpless.

Right now, including Misaka Imouto, the number of Sisters in Academy City was less than ten.

And most of the Sisters were affected by the side effects of excessive gene manipulation and aging acceleration, and were currently undergoing treatment, so they couldn't handle that emergency, let alone battle.

But Misaka Imouto knew.

She knew the name of the person who had helped her when her life was threatened.

The boy who had come alone to the train yard in the middle of the night, who had used only his bare fist to beat the strongest esper in Academy City.

The boy who, no matter how many times he was beaten down, no matter what kind of attack he took, would always grit his teeth and stand back up.

At that moment, the first thing that Misaka Imouto thought of was that boy's face.

The expression of the boy's face that showed that he would never give up.

Of course, Misaka Imouto would really like to not get him involved.

However, Misaka Imouto couldn't find any other source of aid.

Misaka Imouto felt that she was useless.

To be unable to settle the problem with her own power, Misaka Imouto nibbled her lips unhappily. To let other people bear the problem that she herself couldn't handle made Misaka Imouto even more uncomfortable.

But she hadn't realized it. They hadn't realized it.

Right now, the frustration to them a while back was just an unnecessary thing. And that frustration was the best proof of their ability to think for others.

The Sisters knew the location of that dormitory. Misaka Imouto had helped to bring the drinks back to the dormitory. And right now, she was the closest one of all the Sisters to the dormitory. Though Serial Number 20001, Last Order was in the same hospital herself, the development of her own body wasn't complete, so her physical capability was limited.

Misaka Imouto opened the window, and after that, stepped onto the ledge of the window.

(Now doing the final confirmation, Misaka #10032 announces. All the Sisters in Academy City are to follow #11118's plan and assist in retrieving the Remnant.)

(#10032, the damage in your body is greater than the others; maybe you should take your treatment, Misaka #10774 suggests worriedly.)

As those words entered her brain, Misaka Imouto's body trembled slightly.

The Sisters were originally clones with a shorter lifespan. And to help them grow through puberty in that stage, they had done a lot of things, so the Sisters had to be treated to allow their bodies to regain balance.

Of all the Sisters, Misaka Imouto's situation was the worst off. While the experiment was being conducted, Misaka Imouto had been continually attacked by Accelerator, thus she was now a lot weaker than the other Sisters. Right now, she could only walk about in the hospital. Even Heaven Canceller had already forbidden her from doing any combat activity.

Her body was still hot. She couldn't maintain her balance; it was like she was on soft ground.

But this was nothing.

Once she exceeded a certain level of activity, the heat in her body would shoot up, causing Misaka Imouto to spit out blood and fall unconscious.

(It's no problem, Misaka #10032 replies.)

Even so, Misaka Imouto made that decision.

She looked out at the darkness beyond the window, her eyes not wavering.

(What's so worrying about this level of damage? Misaka #10032 retorts. Before fulfilling the promise with that boy, Misaka must not stop, Misaka #10032 says firmly.)

Her words made the information travelling around the network become silent for a few seconds.

After that, a large amount of information moved in like waves.

(Understood, we'll let you handle it, Misaka #14458 nods in agreement.)

(We'll leave it to you, Misaka #19002 agrees.)

(Misaka would also like to thank you, says Misaka as Misaka requests. Though Misaka also wants to do something, says Misaka as Misaka can't stand being here. Also, "that person" hasn't come back yet after leaving, says Misaka as Misaka shakes her hands and feet while grumbling.)

Misaka Imouto frowned slightly.

She then replied, (Misaka #20001, your role in #11118's plan is to remain behind and process the information and network, Misaka #10032 warns. Also, who's that person you're talking about? Misaka #20001? Answer me, Misaka #20001, Misaka #10032 asks and yet can't expect to get a reply.)

After Serial Number 20001 Last Order finished saying what she wanted to say, she cut off the line, refusing to answer Misaka Imouto's calls. Misaka Imouto was troubled at that. The reason Last Order existed was to give an emergency shutdown signal when the Sisters lost control, thus she was ranked higher than an ordinary Sister.

(Anyway, Misaka is going to take action, as Misaka #10032 cuts the telepathic link.)

Misaka Imouto jumped out from the window, completely ignoring the fact that her underwear was exposed. The Tokiwadai Middle School summer uniform danced in the night wind. The moment she landed, Misaka Imouto bent her knees to absorb the impact. Before, in order to increase her fighting capability, the process of absorbing recoil when sniping a tank had been introduced into her head, thus absorbing the impact after jumping down from the second level was nothing to her. Of course, if it was unexpected, like sudden damage in battle, she wouldn't be able to absorb it because she couldn't anticipate it.

Misaka Imouto used all her strength to run out of the hospital. She jumped over the wall, onto the pavement, and advanced down the maze-like streets.

While she ran, Misaka Imouto continued to sweat. If it was a very emotional person, that person would have felt that the sweat was rather uncomfortable. The frog-faced doctor had only treated her halfway, and because she had battled with Accelerator before, her body was a lot weaker than the other Sisters.

However, Misaka Imouto continued to run forward.

If the information from Serial Number 20001 Last Order was correct, then the Remnant may have been retrieved, the Tree Diagram may be under repair or even mass produced, which could result in the experiment being restarted. This situation would likely endanger the lives of the remaining ten thousand Sisters.

Danger and… the safety of her life.

Misaka Imouto had learned how to view her body like that, saying as she continued to run, “Misaka has a reason to not die so easily, Misaka concludes. Basically, Misaka doesn’t want to die in a worthless way, Misaka clearly says.”

That was right, because she had made a promise with a certain boy.

Once her body was treated, she wanted to walk on the streets like it was a normal day.

It was a promise that made her feel good.

If she couldn’t fulfill that, she would be very disappointed.

Misaka Imouto dashed from the lane to the road and into another lane. Kicking garbage bins over, scaring stray cats away. Misaka Imouto narrowed her eyes, wanting to stop and apologize to the cats, but she dared not waste time.

When something happened, Misaka Imouto knew that there was someone who could help.

She was not basing it on theory, but experience.

So Misaka Imouto wanted to pass the danger that she was experiencing to that boy.

“But…”

Misaka Imouto muttered. Once she asked that boy, it was the equivalent to bringing that boy back into the battlefield. However, Misaka Imouto thought differently; if she wanted to avoid bringing trouble and not tell him anything, once the boy knew that the experiment continued, he would still rush in head on without hesitation.

That was right. Misaka Imouto was rather confident about that.

That boy would appear.

Once the experiment continued, the Sisters would be killed one by one according to plan. The boy would definitely clench his fist and rush into battle without caring for his own life.

“Since he’ll be involved in this, might as well explain the situation to him clearly before things go bad. Maybe it might reduce the pain that he feels, Misaka concludes. Of course, Misaka really hopes that Misaka’s own problem won’t trouble others, but Misaka can’t help it, Misaka feels frustrated as she continues to run.”

From the alley to the road, her soles rubbed against the ground as she did a quick turn, passing through the crowds, and sprinting even faster.

Suddenly, Misaka Imouto felt a sharp pain from her temples.

(…!)

Suddenly, Misaka Imouto felt the world swirling around her. It was the interference caused by the electrical flow of the neural signals of the Sisters being jammed together. This occurrence was rather rare, as Misaka Imouto sent out a warning signal regarding her abnormal status, and pulled the goggles on her forehead down, concentrating, and trying to find the reason.

(This is an electronic interference caused by extremely powerful electricity… only the Original… should be able to release such large voltage, Misaka makes an unconfirmed guess. The location should be within a fivehundred-meters radius…)

Such high power voltage couldn’t possibly be used other than for combat. Though Misaka Imouto seemed rather worried, she still decided to head to the dormitory first. She put the goggles back up and continued to sprint.

Not long after, Misaka Imouto arrived at the entrance of the dormitory.

She rushed into the elevator, pressed the seventh level button, and the elevator gradually moved upwards. She was compiling and editing the information that she would be giving the boy. Anyway, it was a fight for every second; she had to tell the boy the most accurate information and the seriousness of the situation in the shortest time possible.

Misaka Imouto pondered, to run down at that time, would he be happy? She really wanted to confirm the time, but she had no watch, so she could only send a signal through the network to ask all the Sisters around the world what time it was before compiling and calculating the time in Japan.

An electronic sound rang from the elevator.

The elevator door swayed open, and Misaka Imouto dashed out again. Though there was an entire row of similar doors, only the door which had a seemingly new handle for some reason was her real destination.

Misaka Imouto quickly stopped in front of the door, politely pressed the doorbell, and without waiting for a reply, opened the door. Unexpectedly, the door wasn't locked. Maybe to the person living there, it wasn't rude to come over at that time, Misaka Imouto randomly made this conclusion and opened the door.

She saw Kamijou Touma.

And she saw the girl called Index.

Both of them were wearing pajamas. For some reason, the girl was on the boy's head, biting on his head. The calico cat noticed the killer look on the girl's face, and maybe its animal instincts caused it to hide in the corner. They were all stunned by the sudden opening of the door, and at the same time, turned to Misaka Imouto, who was at the door.

Misaka Imouto was thinking.

How could she quickly let that person understand the seriousness of the situation in a single sentence?

Misaka Imouto gave up on theory and took action based on her previous experience.

She said, "There's something Misaka wants you to do, Misaka says what's in her heart while looking at your face."

To be able to say that, it showed that she really had changed.

"Please save Misaka and Misaka's sisters, Misaka lowers her head to you sincerely."

The boy didn't ask anything.

He just prompted her to carry on.

CHAPTER 4

The Judger.

Break_or_Crash?

Part 1

Musujime Awaki looked down at Misaka Mikoto, who was still looking for her.

She was standing at the window, with a white luggage bag beside her.

Right now, she was located in a building. It was a pizza shop on the fourth level. However, it wasn't an express pizza shop that did deliveries, but well-made ones. The cheapest one was worth more than three thousand yen, so most middle schoolers and high schoolers wouldn't be able to afford it, and the main customers were, of course, university students and teaching staff members. Maybe because of that, even though it was past 9 PM, the restaurant continued to be operational.

Clean tablecloths were placed on the tables of the high class restaurant. Inside the shop, there was an audio playing light French music that so nicely broke the silence, but didn't prevent the customers from having their own conversations. Half of the tables inside the restaurant were empty, but the signboard indicating that they were full was hung on the door. Keeping a suitable number of empty seats was also an important part in creating a restaurant atmosphere.

The customers inside the shop had seen the Move Point teleporter Musujime appear out of nowhere, but they weren't really panicking. Maybe in this city, everyone was used to that sort of thing.

There was no commotion caused inside the shop, and to Musujime, that was what she wanted. She continued to stare outside the window at Mikoto, who looked around and then dashed into an alley.

(Phew…)

At that moment, Musujime finally heaved a sigh of relief.

When facing off against the Ace of Tokiwadai, it was meaningless to pull back in a straight line. Though the Railgun would dissipate after a certain distance due to air resistance, a lightning strike could hit any corner instantly.

—It was alright no matter how far it was, the main thing was to enter Mikoto's blind spot.

—And in that blind spot, she had to confirm that Mikoto had lost her.

Based on that most important rule, Musujime chose a higher location. After she hid there and waited for Mikoto to leave, she could slowly make her escape.

(Ugh…!)

Once her heart relaxed, the strong sense of wanting to puke suddenly arose.

The large amount of acid made Musujime's throat feel like it was burning. She barely managed to keep the contents of her stomach back, making it look like everything was normal. The palm holding the military flashlight, was covered with disgusting sweat.

Musujime Awaki had been involved in an accident because she lost control of her Move Point ability. Ever since then, she would feel a strong sense of nervousness and fear, creating a huge burden on her body.

Thus, Musujime was trying her best not to move her own body.

(Damn it, why must I always get in this sort of situation, this is truly unfortunate.)

Actually, following the orders of "that man" to send people inside the windowless building was also a rather irritating thing to do. In order to prevent failure, she had to teleport herself with the guest through Move Point instead of teleporting the guest alone. That was the most troublesome part about that job. Not only that, the list of VIPs included low-class people like a blond high school student that wore sunglasses and a red-haired priest. Musujime would rather endure that discomfort because of the benefits that the job brought.

Musujime placed the luggage bag horizontally and sat on it. Then, she pulled out a handkerchief to wipe the sweat off her forehead. She would always feel nervous when she teleported into an unknown area inside a building. She would be roasted if she teleported into an oven, and she would fall heavily if she teleported to mid-air. Though the possibility was low, even if it was one in ten thousand, it was terrifying to her.

Musujime thought that it was lucky that Mikoto had completely lost her. Any ordinary person would run down the alley to search, so she just had to remain inside the buildings and move around to avoid being seen by Misaka Mikoto.

Her maximum teleportation distance was eight hundred meters, but she didn't have enough confidence to continue teleporting. Once she teleported more than four times, the contents of her stomach would very likely be vomited out, and she would go crazy, to such an extent that she wouldn't be able to use her powers.

As for maintaining her mental state, it was best if she could use the Move Point once or twice to avoid the enemy's attack, and then use her two feet to move away on the ground.

Just as Musujime was thinking of her escape plan…

A high class corkscrew opener pierced Musujime Awaki's right shoulder.

"Ah…?"

It was a familiar opener. Wasn't it the thing that she had teleported into that Judgment member?

Before Musujime even understood what it meant, a familiar voice came from behind her.

"I'll return this thing back to you, using such a classless thing, you'll only be looked down upon. Oh yeah, and these things."

After she said that, the sounds of collisions could be heard. It sounded like needles had pierced bags full of mud.

The needles pierced her flank, thigh, and shin, all familiar areas.

The burning sensation of pain emitted from the entire body to the brain, exploding there.

"Ah… ack…"

Musujime Awaki turned away from outside the window to inside the shop. The customers in the shop were all stunned, revealing a look showing that they didn't know what to do.

All except for one.

A girl sitting elegantly on a table, her face looking extremely proud.

The high class atmosphere inside the shop had become her biggest reason for defeat.

Because just as when Musujime had appeared, there was no commotion when Shirai had appeared.

"No need to panic, I avoided your vitals… this isn't hard, I just aimed at where I was hurt. Ah, yes."

Shirai pretended to search her skirt pockets. Musujime started to feel nervous, but Shirai didn't pull out a weapon. Instead she drew out a blood clotting paste from Judgment's own first-aid box.



With a flick off Shirai's finger, the tube of paste landed beside Musujime.

After that, the girl with twin pigtails revealed an evil smile.

"Go ahead, take it and rub it on your wounds. Take off your clothes, your underwear, and lie on the floor pitifully as you rub it on your wounds. It wouldn't be fair if you haven't done that!"

Maybe they suddenly sensed the hostility, or maybe they didn't want to listen to such ugly words, the customers and the staff members finally took action and ran towards the door frantically. The high-class atmosphere was gone in an instant, tables and chairs knocked around all over the place. After the sounds of hurried footsteps and chaos became silent, the shop was empty.

There were just two people, both glaring at each other.

The distance between them was about ten meters. No matter whether it was teleportation or Move Point, the range was more than enough. In other words, the distance was no longer significant.

The soft air-conditioning and the graceful light French music was abnormally clear to the human ear.

Shirai had been sitting on the table all that time.

But it wasn't because she knew that she had won, but rather because her body was unable to stand her injuries. However, Musujime was now the same. Both of them had been hit with the same weapons in the same regions. So she could imagine how severe the enemy's injuries were by looking at her own injuries.

"…You're good… however… I don't hate the way you're taking revenge."

Musujime sat on the luggage bag that was beside the window. Even if she was covered with wounds, she wanted to show that nothing was wrong. Maybe she was trying to bluff, or maybe it was her pride.

For both sides, it was hard for them to even move.

However, they had another way to move.

"This is really bad," Shirai said mockingly. "With this commotion, Onee-sama, who's so smart, cool and active, will immediately run over here."

"!!"

“Based on your personality, if there’s a winnable opponent, you won’t run away shamefully with your tail behind your back, huh? To cause so many meaningless wounds on your enemy, and leave with a sense of superiority, isn’t that your favorite trick? Like the time when you faced off against me.”

Thinking back, during the battle at the construction yard, Musujime hadn’t fired a single attack at Mikoto, only defending herself without even trying to counterattack. That was the biggest proof that Musujime felt that she couldn’t beat Mikoto.

In other words, once Mikoto arrived, Musujime would definitely be defeated.

To Shirai, who was severely injured, there was no need for her to try and beat Musujime. She just needed to delay and wait for Mikoto to arrive for that second “victory”.

“Humph, I guess that you overestimated the Ace of Tokiwadai. Even the Railgun isn’t invincible. If she’s to face say, the strongest Level 5 in Academy City, she’ll be dead.”

“However, with our powers, can we even reach Level 5?”

Shirai Kuroko mocked.

It was a sentence that lowered her pride, yet she was saying it so proudly.

She was not hiding her reverence for Misaka Mikoto.

Musujime turned pale, her jaw dropped.

(Don’t tell me she created this commotion for this purpose…? Not only did she launch a sneak attack on me, she wants to bring the Railgun over to increase her chances of winning…?)

Musujime’s brain was moving quickly. If so, the condition for her to win wasn’t to beat the Judgment member in front of her, but whether the Railgun arrived. In other words, she didn’t need to care about wasting time with Shirai Kuroko, and should hurry up and leave using Move Point.

“Forget about it.”

Shirai’s words interrupted Musujime’s thoughts.

“You can’t escape. Haven’t you noticed? Our conditions are similar. In this condition, being injured, in this sort of place, with this kind of power, and to be chased by Onee-sama… as one with a similar power, can’t I guess where you’re going to run?”

“!? …You’re… good…!”

Musujime Awaki was surprised, unable to say another word. Shirai just stared at her, revealing a thin smile.

“If you think I’m only bluffing, I advise you to get rid of that naïve thinking. The knowledge I got from the library, and the experience I got when I fought you, and as an esper with similar powers, our thinking would be similar… all this evidence can back my instincts.”

At that moment, Musujime finally realized it.

The meaning behind all the actions that Shirai had done.

(She made those similar wounds with the corkscrew and the needles to allow herself to be on equal footing with me, and decrease the difference between us in order to predict my movements even more accurately!)

Similar abilities, similar wounds, similar thinking… Shirai had done that to try and guess what Musujime Awaki would do next.

She couldn’t look down on that girl, Musujime gritted her teeth as she thought.

Even if she was to run away using Move Point, she would catch up. If so, even if she ran to the other end of the earth, she wouldn’t feel safe.

Every time Musujime teleported, it felt like her stomach was flipped around, it felt unbearable.

If the Move Point that she desperately used every time was to be solved by that girl, it would be a painful thing. Besides, she could only teleport herself consecutively for three to four times, so she couldn’t waste it.

If so…

“That’s right, you have only one winning condition, and that is to beat me before Onee-sama arrives,” Shirai Kuroko casually remarked. “However, there are two conditions for me to win. The first is for me to beat you, the second is when Onee-sama arrives… whoever has the advantage, I guess there’s no need for me to spell it out, is there?”

Shirai clearly announced that she was in an advantageous situation, shocking Musujime. The number of options she had was becoming even more limited.

Musujime trembled in fear… however, she slowly shook her head.

No.

Musujime realized it.

The Judgment member in front of her didn't want to get the Railgun involved at all.

If she had wanted to get the Railgun involved, why hadn't she brought her along in the first place?

Musujime smiled slightly.

After figuring out one thing, the ideas started to flow in.

Maybe that was a flaw of Shirai's intention for both of them to be in similar conditions, as Musujime saw through Shirai's thoughts.

Her consciousness was becoming clearer.

Musujime regained her cool.

"…Such a wonderful coincidence. For you to give up on winning twice. The first time is when you didn't bring the Railgun here, and secondly, the sneak attack. You didn't care about winning or losing, since you could have killed me if you pierced my brain or heart. If you did this only to compliment that Railgun's naïve fantasy, then it's really pitiful."

Before she could even rebut, Shirai's body was already trembling slightly.

Musujime understood what was going on. It was because she had the same wounds.

Both of them were too injured, especially Shirai, who had searched for Musujime for several hours. Though the wounds had stopped bleeding, her lost strength was hard to recover, so Shirai's condition was worse off than Musujime. Comparing Musujime, who was just injured, to Shirai, who had been injured and yet ran around all over the place, the amount of strength each had was completely different.

So Musujime laughed. She was laughing at the advantage that she had, and the stupidity of the enemy.

"So pitiful. You could have used the second-best way to settle this problem, yet you still insist on using the best way. Is your life worth risking to protect that world?" Musujime Awaki sat on the luggage bag and said, "That naïve fantasy world that the Railgun is thinking about?"

On hearing that, Shirai Kuroko glared at Musujime Awaki.

Shirai's eyes were filled with strong determination. She could only sit on the table, her body was unable to move, and the trembling in her weak wrists that were failing, that would convince Musujime even more that Shirai was in a disadvantageous situation, but Shirai didn't care. She didn't even bother bluffing, instead glaring straight at the enemy in front.

In that ridiculous and laughable confrontation, Shirai replied without hesitation.

"…It's worth it."

Shirai felt that it was worth using her limited amount of strength to answer that question.

"Of course it's worth it, isn't that nonsense? Even though Onee-sama is naïve and stubborn, and she doesn't consider our difficulties, Onee-sama really wishes to create a world where you and I don't have to do this sort of thing. She's really naïve, isn't she? Onee-sama really intends to catch us and lecture us in the name of justice and let this case close. Even in this situation, she really intends to help us. Not just me, but also you."

Shirai Kuroko laughed.

A laugh that was pure, without a hint of irony.

"Even when facing this situation, Onee-sama really wishes that everyone won't argue and will give up on killing each other. She doesn't approve of what I did; she could have killed you in five seconds… but she chose not to. She's still looking for that perfect ending. She could have settled everything with the flip of a coin… but she chose not to kill, which is why she got herself tired."

"…"

"Do you think that I, Shirai Kuroko, have the heart to destroy this naïve and childish wish? To sneak up and stick a metal needle in your brain, and settle this with death and blood? To trample on other people's efforts in order to protect my own life!?"

Shirai roared and slowly got off the table. Her legs were trembling, yet they were filled with strength. It was like they were forecasting that the main event was up next.

"In order to fulfill her wish and show that I agree with her, I will bring you back to this normal world!"

"If so, I suppose I win if I reject your goodwill, right?" Musujime Awaki said as she sat on the luggage bag.

An attitude that showed that she was not going to fool around.

Part 2

Shirai believed that the situation was simple.

Both Shirai and Musujime were injured rather badly. Even if they stopped the bleeding, they couldn't possibly recover their strength so quickly. Should she attack the enemy first? Even if it was just a gentle push, it could potentially end the battle.

(If we seriously battle… I think I can only last for ten seconds.)

Even if she didn't get hit, she would reopen her wounds if she moved her limbs with all her might. Especially now that Shirai didn't have much strength left. Once she lost any more blood, she would immediately lose consciousness.

Musujime's power was terrifying. If it wasn't for the limitation that a teleporter couldn't move someone else with a similar power, she could have slammed Shirai into a wall or the floor.

Shirai and Musujime glared at each other.

There was a ten meter distance between them.

A loud noise could be heard outside.

A part of the steel tower that Mikoto had attacked collapsed, making a large impact sounding like a bell ringing.

The sound signaled the start of the battle.

Shirai raised her fist and quickly slammed it onto the table that she was sitting on. The skin on her palm cracked, and the surface of the table broke into pieces. Shirai grabbed a sharp fragment and prepared to teleport it. A teleport attack could tear anything apart from within, so it could be considered a sure kill technique. Also, as it was a point-to-point attack, anything that was in a direct line couldn't block it.

At that moment, Musujime used her Move Point.

She swung her military flashlight, wanting to stuff a silver tray inside Shirai's body. Though it was an ordinary tray, the Move Point could easily pass through a human body. Once it hit, death was inevitable.

However, Shirai was faster by a bit.

She sidestepped. The silver tray appeared in mid-air like a guillotine, falling onto the ground.

Though Musujime's power was great, maybe she needed a sense of rhythm, as she had a habit of swinging the military flashlight first.

It was hard to grab a chance to counterattack and not cause a lose-lose situation, but it was not so hard if it was just dodging.

"Cheh!"

Musujime inadvertently frowned. She swung the military flashlight around in a circle, and five or six tables beside her vanished into thin air before appearing before Musujime. Those tables were packed together, forming a huge shield which blocked Musujime's body.

(A mistake in sending…? No! It's a shield to block my sight…!)

Shirai had already experienced that before. As teleportation was also a point-to-point attack, as long as one slightly deviated from the original position, the person could dodge it. In order to make Shirai think that she had already teleported away, Musujime purposely created a wall.

(If so…)

Shirai used her teleport.

She grabbed a fragment of the plate, and teleported it together with her own body.

After appearing on the other side of the restaurant table shields, Shirai raised the fragment again.

(…Then I'll use myself to guess the location!)

Since her vision was blocked by the obstacles in front, she just needed to get to the other side of the obstacles. She wouldn't miss if she could clearly see where Musujime was standing before she teleported the fragment.

That was because Musujime Awaki was unable to teleport her own body instantly.

Shirai hoped to use the sharp fragment to aim at the enemy and get the victory.

Shirai Kuroko heard the sound of air being ripped.

Musujime was standing one step in front of Shirai, but she was holding the heavy luggage bag with both hands, using all the strength in her hips to smack the luggage bag at Shirai's face. As she was holding the luggage bag with both hands, she had the military flashlight between her teeth.

From Musujime's expression, it seemed that she hadn't really predicted Shirai's method of attack.

(From that comfortable expression, she seems to be relieved that she was prepared for that attack. It's really working, huh…!)

The hard side of the luggage bag came swinging at Shirai's face, so Shirai quickly teleported the sharp fragment and cut the 'n' shaped handle of the luggage bag.

The luggage bag went flying in a completely wrong direction.

Musujime, who was only holding onto the handle, revealed a surprised look.

(Now… here's the chance…!!)

Shirai infused all her strength into her injured right hand and clenched her tiny fist.

The distance was so close. Instead of doing the calculations and using her ability, she might as well send a punch.

However…

Musujime, who was biting on her military flashlight, moved backwards slightly.

"!!"

Shirai panicked. Musujime's unexpected movement of made Shirai unable to counter with her ability.

She moved back by one step. At that moment, everything in front turned white. That was the color of the luggage bag. After her brain processed what was going on, Shirai couldn't help but feel that her back had gone numb. What had happened was that the luggage bag that flew out of Musujime hands had been teleported by Musujime using the Move Point in front of Shirai's eyes. The bag hadn't decreased in speed as it flew, but the path got adjusted, which caused it to fly towards Shirai's face.

If Shirai hadn't taken a step back just now, her head would have been blown off by the luggage bag that had appeared out of nowhere.

However, even though she dodged the fatal blow, she was going to be hit by the heavy luggage bag.

It was too late for her even if she wanted to react.

The luggage bag slammed hard into Shirai's face, and the huge impact sent Shirai flying backward. Shirai was unable to maintain her balance. Her skin retracted during the process.

It seemed that some hot liquid gushed out from the wounds on her shoulder and her flank, and her fist that had been clenched tightly was released. Shirai tried her best to stand upright, but her feet still left the ground.

Just as she was about to be knocked down, Shirai teleported again.

Shirai's body vanished. She maintained that falling position and appeared behind Musujime, facing her back with her own back.

The momentum of the fall hadn't decreased. Shirai extended her elbow backwards and landed directly on Musujime's back. Being hit like that, Musujime fell forward into the tables that were stacked up. Before Shirai could confirm that Musujime had fallen, she landed on the ground. The impact from the fall caused her wounds to reopen.

(Gack… Ah…!)

In order to give the final blow, Shirai squeezed out all her remaining strength and grabbed an item beside her. It was the handle that had been cut off the luggage bag. Shirai's teleport attack could be used on any item, not just a sharp one.

(It's—my win!)

Shirai cried out in her heart as she aimed at the enemy. She calculated and tried to move the handle in her hand over.

(…!?)

However, her ability couldn't activate.

The handle in her hand didn't move at all.

The sharp pain and strong anxiety robbed her of her concentration, causing her to be unable to use her ability.

"Oh no—!!"

That predicament made Shirai even more anxious. She carried her last ounce of hope and looked at Musujime Awaki, hoping that she would be in similar pain and unable to use her ability.

Shirai heard a light whoosh.

The stack of tables around Musujime had disappeared.

After that, in a manner similar to that of eating a kebab, she pulled out the military flashlight that she was biting.

Shirai sensed a chill.

She quickly rolled on floor, wanting to get away.

But the tables were above her, and they then fell due to gravity.

"...!"

Shirai got onto the floor, covering the back of her head with both hands. The heavy attack landed on her like a blunt weapon, increasing the depth of her wounds. She was hurting so badly that she wanted to roll on the floor, but the large number of tables left her unable to move away.

In that narrow vision, she could only see Musujime, who was on the floor, kick the floor and move her body to prevent being hit by the falling table. The needles in her limbs tore Musujime's wounds wide open, hurting her so badly that she cried out in pain. However, she immediately used Move Point to teleport the luggage bag that didn't have a handle beside her, and leaned on it, looking at Shirai.

Musujime pointed at the chairs nearby with the military flashlight.

The movement was extremely slow.

"Shirai-san, you'll lose your life if you don't dodge this."

Musujime gave a mocking smile as she slid the front tip of the military flashlight from the back of the chair to Shirai. The circular front side of the military flashlight stopped in front of Shirai.

"!!"

Shirai inadvertently turned pale, but she still couldn't use her teleportation.

Shirai couldn't help but tremble, however, the chairs teleported by Move Point landed beside her. The large number of tables stacked on Shirai were pushed by the chairs, causing them to collapse, like a pyramid of poker cards. However, only the shape had changed, the fact that Shirai was being pinned down hadn't changed.

"Oh, you still can't escape even in this condition? Seems like you can't do your teleportation calculations."

Musujime's face had no more sign of nervousness.

She laughed.

The fresh blood seeped through from the wounds, dying Musujime Awaki's face red, but she still laughed.

"Shirai-san, oh Shirai-san. Do you know? You can hear a lot of things if you're beside 'that person'. One of them, hm… I wonder if you've heard of it before?" Musujime said as if she was humming to a tune.

After confirming the locations of the needles and the corkscrew, she breathed heavily and swung the military flashlight around. All the strange items disappeared and then appeared before her. Under the influence of gravity, the metal needles and the corkscrew dropped to the floor, making a sharp sound.

"In the beginning, there was a group full of powerful espers."

To Musujime, treating the wounds that were causing her pain seemed to be more important than maintaining her distance from Shirai. She looked around for tools to treat her wounds. The tube of blood-clotting paste that Shirai had thrown was beside her feet, but maybe to maintain her pride, she kicked it far away.

(She wants to… treat her wounds here? To do this without any worry in front of me? What's she planning? Onee-sama could be here any minute…)

Shirai's heart was filled with suspicion, but Musujime still maintained a leisurely look.

The wounds, with the needles removed, were oozing blood.

But the smile on Musujime's face didn't disappear, the look made it terrifying.

"But there were very few people with great powers, so in order to increase their capability, they decided to use a method to increase the number of espers. That method was to clone them. Do you know what the result was?"

Shirai couldn't move.

The hand that was extended out from the gap between the tables could only swing about in mid-air. She could neither move the tables away, nor could she even hit the enemy in front of her.

From the looks of it, Musujime seemed rather satisfied. She tore her own skirt and tied it on her thigh to stop the bleeding.

Misaka Mikoto still hadn't arrived.

Because such fierce fighting took place, the customers and staff members should have escaped, and the ruckus should have spread outside. Maybe the noise hadn't reached Mikoto's ears? Or did Mikoto think that this incident had nothing to with the Remnant?

Shirai didn't wish for Mikoto to be there, but she didn't feel safe when she was not there. Maybe Mikoto was bothered by Musujime's other companions?

And what was more unbelievable was…

(Musujime's expression… why is she so confident…? Does she think that she can win against Onee-sama even in that condition…?)

Shirai felt very puzzled, while Musujime said rather unhurriedly, "I can only describe it as appalling. Those scapegoats that were created didn't even have 1% of the power. Even though this less than 1% was rather impressive for this world's standard, if they were to battle against a powerful esper, not even ten or twenty thousand of them would be a match."

Musujime Awaki, who was drenched in blood, continued to tear her skirt and wrap it around the wound on her shin.

Shirai guessed, maybe she had hurt Musujime's pride too much, and Musujime was pursuing a decisive victory, thus she was rattling on and on.

Musujime's skirt was already very short, and not only was her underwear almost exposed, but she didn't seem to mind. Instead, she just smiled slightly.

"Shirai-san, the children that were created from the cloning technique had the exact same genes as the original, and even the structure of their brain was the same. Yet their ability was so different, why do you think this is so?"

The overconfidence that was flowing from Musujime's words made Shirai want to puke, but if she didn't care about her, Musujime would lose interest and leave the scene with the luggage bag.

“Such… such a stupid question. Don’t you know how the schools in Academy City are ranked…?”

Even if both were of the same quality, as long as the method of nurturing was different, the results would be different. Thus, there were many ways to develop the espers’ powers, thus the difference in school standards.

However, Musujime was still calm.

“Nope, those clones were trained in an environment where they should have ended up with the same power. However, the results were very disappointing. They had the same brain, yet they could not achieve the same results. Don’t you think that there are other factors other than the brain that affect the quality? Then, if we could find this condition, could we use powers without a calculating source like the human brain?”

Musujime Awaki was unconcerned with the blood that was splattering on her face.

She stopped doing her emergency first aid and said, “In other words, is the human brain required in the development of powers in the first place?”

Shirai couldn’t help but breathe out some cold air.

The powers developed by Academy City were a major breakthrough in quantum mechanics. Using Personal Realities, which was a reality that was observed by deliberately distorting the mental calculations and decision making ability, caused an unnatural change in a radical microscopic world to create some sort of phenomena.

“What… are you saying?”

Shirai couldn’t help but retort.

“Academy City’s lessons… involve the most advanced neuro-science.”

“That’s right. However, the dealing with phenomenon… which is to observe and analyze a target, can only humans do that?” Musujime said happily, “For example, plants can detect sunlight. Some plants will close their flowers and leaves up at night. Don’t tell me that these plants aren’t observing the world?”

Musujime wanted to stop the bleeding of the wound on her shoulder, but she couldn’t tear her skirt any more. She could only tear down the shoulder line of her winter Western-style jacket and use it as a bandage.

Shirai felt that this wasn’t good.

Once Musujime completed her first-aid, she would head on to the next thing. As the current situation stood, the only thing that could stop Musujime was her own mouth.

“Too… this is too stupid. Such a ridiculous idea. If you can count reacting to sunlight as an observation, then would the posters and photographs that react to ultraviolet rays have some form of observation ability? The main thing about creating powers should be about how they view it, right? So, the lessons that Academy City provides is to help each student find a Personal Reality that no one else has. What esper powers need aren’t special senses, but special processing capabilities.”

But Shirai’s words didn’t cause any emotional response from Musujime.

Right now, Musujime had only the wound on the side of her abdomen to treat. She originally intended to use the belt that was holding the military flashlight to stop the bleeding, but that belt made of metallic plates didn’t seem able to do the job.

Thus, she could only use the pink cloth that was wrapped around her chest to wrap her waist. To her, it seemed like as long as they were of the same gender, it was alright for her to be naked in front of outsiders. She pulled the winter jacket that had only one sleeve left and covered her exposed breasts, but that action was rather muddled up.

“You mean that without a high level of mental activity, there’s no way to develop esper powers?”

“That’s right.”

Shirai replied, but deep inside, she was rather insecure, as it seemed like Musujime was luring her to argue back. The best evidence was that Musujime didn’t seem to be bothered by her own arguments.

“Then what about ants? Ants know how to work in teams, to circle around and build their hive, and even look for food. Also, ants know how to do some form of contracts. They can help weird insects like aphids to chase away ladybugs and get the ‘forest honey’ from them. In other words, they have the most original rationale… if you deny their mental makeup, it’s the same as denying thought processes that are different from humans, yet similar.”

Musujime adjusted the tightness of her bandage replacement.

“You’re basically unreasonable.”

“Why is this unreasonable? Ants are classified according to their physical characteristics, there are male ants, queen ants and worker ants, which means they know how to have a social division of labor. They can use their antennas to communicate through signals, and some of them even have light emitting organs. On what basis do you think that their mental activity is of a low level? What is the high level of human mental activity to you?

Even insects have their logic and morals too. Even ants know that they have to protect their larvae."

Musujime Awaki gave a slight smile.

"Even ants can observe the surroundings." She paused for a while, then continued, "On what basis do you have to decide that between ants and us, which side has the correct view on the surroundings? On what basis can you say that ants will never be able to use powers?"

Shirai Kuroko shuddered.

The fact that the basic idea of superpowers was denied made her tremble.

She stared at the "thing" beside Musujime Awaki.

"There are many lives of equal footing—no, maybe of a higher class than human life. If you can't agree with that, it's just your arrogance as a human." Musujime smiled calmly, feeling up the surface of the luggage bag with her fingertips. "By switching the thinking in another direction, you'll see that the 'answer' is very close to us. That's right, it's right beside us."

The surface of the luggage bag was glowing under the lights.

Remnant.

Silicorandum.

Tree Diagram.

A higher class, huge, complicated… an artificial brain that just lacked a little bit of flexibility compared to humans.

"Shirai Kuroko-san, this term called the 'brain', can't it be used on certain terms other than humans? If you are a human supremacist that can't even accept such a simple truth, I might be a little disappointed."

Even ants could observe their surroundings.

As long as there was a brain, powers could be created.

It need not be humans.

If so… if so… if so… Shirai Kuroko stared at the luggage bag beside Musujime Awaki.

“Don’t tell me… you think that the core of that thing… can create esper powers just like us? Are you serious? This thought is as ridiculous as a robot having a soul!”

However…

Going deeper, was a high level system like the human soul required for observing reality and analyzing it? Shirai started to lose confidence.

In contrast, Musujime looked rather poised.

“That’s right, that level of progress can’t be achieved. A machine is a machine after all. Once the anti-shake and auto-adjust AI of a digital camera is facing a phenomenon, what the calculating chip does is to arrange the pixels on the image according to the information. In terms of dealing with information, this is completely different from observing a phenomenon.” She looked rather confident as she stroked the surface of the luggage bag, and continued, “Also, we have confirmed that we can’t find any plants and animals other than humans that can use superpowers. Whether my point is valid is a big question. But with this thing, we can proceed on with the predictions. As long as we have this super simulator that can simulate anything faithfully, it’s not a problem to find what the entire world hasn’t discovered now, or even any changes in biological evolution ten thousand years later. Thus, I must have the Remnant to repair the Tree Diagram. I want it to decide, with all the possibilities, whether there are organisms other than humans that can develop superpowers.”

A strange glint appeared in Musujime’s eyes.

Shirai thought that that glint was called paranoia.

“For this purpose… you’re willing to work secretly with outside organizations…?”

“That’s right. Even if I get the precious Remnant, I can’t repair it by myself. Thus, I need to work with an organization that has the technology, knowledge and motivation.”

Musujime Awaki laughed.

That organization was most probably uninterested in Musujime’s thoughts. They probably had other motives. The capability of the Tree Diagram was too strong, the number of organizations that wanted it was probably more than the hairs on a cow.

“Shirai-san, how did you feel when you had powers for the first time?”

Shirai couldn’t move her body at all, so she could only move her mouth.

She lay prone underneath the table, saying nonchalantly, “Not…nothing much. The adults around me were shocked, but I wasn’t too surprised myself. To me, it’s no big deal.”

“Really…? To be honest, I was really scared.” Musujime reminisced her childhood and said, “Once I thought of what this ability can do, I was really scared. I was even more scared when I actually did it. Shirai-san, in this world, the thing I’m most fearful of is this sort of ability. This ability that can kill people with little imagination.”

Right now, the girl was no longer trembling in fear,

“However, I have always accepted that this is my fate. Only humans have this power. Humans have researched in some specific area and discovered this power, and use it for specific uses. In other words, I have to have this power. Since I can’t avoid it, I can only endure it. However, a doubt crept inside me.”

Musujime smiled.

Her mouth was becoming a thin and long crack like a melting ice-cream.

“If I’m not the only one with this sort of power, why must I have it? If it’s not just a power that only humans have, why must humans have it? If it need not be me, why must it be me? Shirai-san, oh so gullible, and yet never thought a thing about it. Shirai-san, let me tell you, those esper children that were with me just now have similar thoughts. Of course, that’s not including the adults. In that building, I did indeed use them as shields, but I did that on their suggestion. Before they were unconscious, they even smiled, saying…‘We’ll leave it to you.’”

There were many cases of Level 0s who couldn’t get powers and began to turn bad.

However, there were two sides to every event.

Occasionally, there were people with esper powers so strong that they couldn’t adjust to it.

The thing called esper powers was like a monster in a monster movie.

If they wanted to live peacefully with normal humans, they had to be wary whenever they walked on the streets. Once they exerted too much strength, they could destroy the constructs around them. In actuality, espers with powers on the Railgun’s level normally wouldn’t be able to get a chance to go all out, instead, they had to suppress their powers. In a certain sense, it was like living a life with shackles on their limbs.

“Do we really need to have this sort of power? Don’t you want to know the answer? No matter whether there is a need, at least we should confirm it, shouldn’t we?”

Musujime Awaki slowly opened her arms wide.

As if she was inviting Shirai Kuroko.

“I believe you have hurt others with that ability of yours, right? You must have thought before: why do you have such a power?”

As if she wanted to hug Shirai Kuroko, bringing her over.

The reason why Musujime hadn’t given Shirai the final blow was because she wanted Shirai to listen to those words.

“I’m clear of this, because you’re like me. I can close my eyes and imagine how you have hurt others. So…”

As if she was singing to her lover.

Musujime Awaki was giving the signal that she never intended to kill her from the beginning.

“I understand this pain of yours more than anyone else. Because I understand your pain, I know how to get rid of it. So, how about it, Shirai-san? If you’re interested in finding out about the truth, I can let you join our ranks.”

From Musujime Awaki’s expression, one could tell that she would rather risk Misaka Mikoto arriving and say so many words just to elaborate on that conclusion.

No esper would be able to ignore those words.

Any esper in this city, and those who had fought before would have faced a similar problem.

That was “how to use one’s own powers to cause more damage to the opponent?”

And “how big was the damage?”

How painful was it? How unbearable was it? Could it destroy everything? Would it be interrupted? Could it defeat or even destroy the enemy?

And once everything was over, they would be trembling in fear.

Why do I have this power?

Do I need to have this power in the first place?

The basic values that she had were being shaken.

“I refuse.” Being pinned underneath the tables, Shirai glared at Musujime with a sharp expression and said in a deep, scary voice, “I thought that it was some ideal that made you want to do this that made you create this huge trouble, but it’s just this petty idea, huh? Onee-sama was correct, a villain really has small noses and eyes.”

“What… did… you say…?”

“My reaction should be normal, right? Why are you so shocked? Can that stupid, narcissistic nonsense of yours move me, Shirai Kuroko? Seeing that confident look of yours, were you thinking that after convincing me, I’ll help to convince Onee-sama? Or were you abused enough and love to listen to my sarcastic remarks?” Shirai paused for a while, and continued, “Besides, what animals? What evolution? What possibility? Ha! What’s the point of saying these things now? Even if we are to give different varieties of ants improvements and superpowers, how can we benefit?”

“What benefit…? Don’t you understand yet? If things other than humans can use powers, we don’t have to be monsters like teleporters. We don’t need such dangerous powers in the first place…”

“Such stupidity. What I’m trying to say is, even if we find any possibility, what changes can it bring to us when we’re already espers?”

“…”

“If you’re doing this for the future generations, I might be touched and even cry. However, to us who are already espers, what’s the point of raising such a possibility?”

Shirai paused.

The arm that was stretched in mid-air between the gaps of the table was now resting firmly on the floor.

“Besides, the idea of superpowers hurting others, really, there’s not much ambition to it. Before a collapsed bridge is repaired, I can use my powers to help others to cross the river. If there are people trapped in the underground mall, I can help them escape to the surface. If the use is correct, what’s so bad about using esper powers?”

The tables that were stacked up were shaking slightly, creating a rattling sound.

Shirai Kuroko gritted her teeth, exerting all her strength from her tired and battered body.

“To me, those dreamy words of yours are way beyond lame. Scared of your power? You don’t want to hurt others so you don’t want the power? It’s nice when you say it, but who was the one who hurt me to such an extent? If you want to know whether your actions are correct, just look at my wounds! This is the answer!”

The large number of tables pressing on the girl continued to shake.

The girl pressed her hands and feet onto the ground. She exerted all her strength into the muscles, not caring even when blood was gushing out of her wounds.

“With that dangerous power, we’ll become dangerous people? With that power, we become important people? You’re thinking too simple, idiot! Onee-sama and my lives aren’t so smooth sailing either! We worked hard to think of ways to help everyone so that we can get everyone’s recognition and establish our footing in society!”

The hill of tables was starting to shake violently.

In order to escape from that heavy pressure, Shirai Kuroko exerted even more force.

“You just look at Onee-sama, who’s running around! As long as she seriously releases her Railgun, she could have settled all her problems in a minute! But she doesn’t wish for everything to end in a bloody mess, so she gave up on the easiest way to settle it and is even willing to put herself in danger! Not just me, even you, as an enemy, she wants to save you! Because of this, she has the right to be called my onee-sama!!”

The shaking sound was now a crashing sound.

The hill of tables was starting to collapse.

The terrifying weight pressing on the girl was starting to collapse.

“Basically, your reasoning only showed your arrogance and contempt of other mortals! I’m going to twist that rotten personality of yours around! Once you’re defeated by an ordinary person like me, you’ll know that you’re an ordinary person yourself! Then I’m going to bring you, as an ordinary person, back into the ordinary world!!”

Shirai Kuroko stood up.

Blood continued to gush from her wounds, staining her clothes and body. She grabbed a floor lamp and lowered her hands. She didn’t have any more strength to teleport.

However…

So what?

Shirai’s expression was saying: even without powers, I can beat you.

Shirai wanted to prove through her actions that there was no need for any special ability to beat the enemy.

As long as there was a firm belief.

Shirai Kuroko moved forward fearlessly.

Forward.

One step, two steps, three steps.

She faltered, unable to maintain her balance. She couldn't even lift the lamp, and could only drag it

However, that terrifying momentum of hers made Musujime back away.

Musujime let out a cry of shock.

Shirai was a terrifying person.

It didn't matter whether she had powers or not. Regardless, Shirai was a terrifying person.

Musujime Awaki shielded her chest with the jacket that had only one sleeve left, sitting on the floor and backing away. She could have escaped quickly with Move Point, but she forgot about it. The fear and anxiety made her unable to calculate the coordinates. Her eyes could no longer see anything other than the slowly advancing Shirai Kuroko.

—I will lose.

Musujime Awaki made a baseless conclusion.

—I will lose. There is no reason, but I will definitely lose…

Shirai Kuroko was already right in front of her. Musujime, who was sitting on the ground, looked up, exchanging looks with Shirai, who was looking down.

Shirai slowly lifted her hand.

The lamp was slowly lifted past the head with twintailed hair like a baseball bat.

A terrifying weapon.

Though Musujime had the Move Point ability, she was still an ordinary high school student.

A light collision sound was heard. The military flashlight in Musujime's hand dropped onto the floor.

Musujime believed she would lose.

This Move Point user, Musujime Awaki, would definitely be unable to beat the Teleporter, Shirai Kuroko.

But…

Even so…

Strictly speaking, Shirai Kuroko was wary of it right from the beginning.

Espers didn't really need to use their powers as weapons.

Since Musujime had been working with outside organizations, Shirai should have thought of it.

That was, had Musujime gotten any weapons from her allies?

An explosion could be heard.

At that moment, Shirai Kuroko had already raised both hands up in the air—completely unguarded against the enemy's attack—she slowly turned to look at her abdomen.

At her abdomen, a deep red hole appeared in her uniform, and the magical-colored fluid was flowing out from the hole. Half a second later, one could see the glass window behind shattering into pieces.

The effect of the air-conditioning was weakening. The calm wind of the night was flowing in.

Shirai's body wobbled backwards.

Under the influence of the heavy weight of the lamp, she fell back onto the floor.

"Ha…"

Musujime Awaki laughed, but her right hand was trembling.

A trail of white smoke was floating upwards from the muzzle of her pistol.

"Ha… ha…"

Musujime Awaki had beaten the slowly approaching Shirai Kuroko.

But at the same time, she admitted something.

That having esper powers wasn't the main problem.

She had always blamed the act of hurting others on superpowers, but now, she hadn't used the power of her Move Point. Even without powers, she still ended up hurting others. In the end, the one who had to take responsibility wasn't her powers, but herself, who controlled the powers.

(In the end… it's all…)

Musujime felt that her lips, tongue and throat were incomparably dry, so dry that she couldn't hear anything.

Thus, she could only conclude silently.

The one responsible for all that.

Up until then, the reason why the people around her got hurt was…

The reason why there was red fluid in front of her was…

That weakness of hers to use powers as an excuse.

Musujime Awaki recalled.

Those espers with similar ideals. Those that were afraid of their own powers, suspecting the necessity of them, those who jumped into battle in search for the answer. Those people who had willingly became shields in order to protect Musujime from getting hit by Misaka Mikoto's electricity strikes in the building that was under construction.

Musujime always thought that she was one of them as well.

But the truth was so different.

She was just…

A liar who stood beside them. She lied to them.

Even if they used the Remnant to repair the Tree Diagram, getting the possibility of esper powers that no one had thought about before, and developing according to her plan.

Musujime Awaki's nature would not change.

Musujime Awaki was a girl who would always hurt others.

“Ha… ah… Gyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhh!!”

Musujime cupped her hands on her head, looked up and shouted.

She tossed the jacket in her hands away. Musujime did not care whether her torso was naked anymore.

Her index finger was still on the trigger of the pistol, and it could fire off anytime accidentally, but she didn’t care as she pulled her hair, seemingly not aware about that simple fact. She screamed and roared, the muscles on her face being completely distorted, as if all the things inside her body were about to erupt.

An explosion could be heard.

Musujime, who was sitting on the floor and pulling her hair, accidentally squeezed the trigger. The muzzle that just so happened to be pointing upwards shot out sparks. The bullet flew towards the ceiling, but it didn’t stick into the ceiling. Instead, it ricocheted down, coincidentally hitting the center of the military flashlight on the ground. The military flashlight bent into a ‘c’ shape and flew far away. However, Musujime didn’t care about such a trivial matter.

“Gyaaaaahh! Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhh!!”

Like a rampant beast, Musujime pointed the pistol at Shirai.

She squeezed the trigger. However, she couldn’t feel the special vibration of the spring hitting inside the pistol.

An empty, laughable feeling was left on the finger.

“Uu… ah… ah…?”

Musujime became suspicious.

Lowering her head, though her right hand still maintained the posture of holding a pistol, the pistol had already disappeared.

A light colliding sound could be heard from afar.

The pistol suddenly landed on the floor, fifteen meters away.

Move Point.

Of course, Musujime Awaki hadn’t intended to teleport the pistol. But what she hadn’t intended had happened. Musujime pondered on what that meant, but at that moment…

She completely lost control of her powers…

A massive sound echoed out.

With Musujime as the center, everything in a five meter radius—chairs, tables, knives, forks, spoons, ornamental plants, plates, luggage bags—vanished. As if a perfect circle was drawn around Musujime, everything inside the circle vanished. Those tables and chairs on the circumference were squashed and ripped apart by the objects that suddenly appeared, creating a huge sound. If it was not for the fact that a teleporter couldn't teleport another teleporter, even Shirai would have been sent to the circumference.

"…"

Musujime looked extremely cold. She raised her index finger and gently hooked it.

In an instant, the pistol returned to her hand. However, a spoon was stuck in the middle of it. Seemed like after she teleported the pistol, she teleported the spoon back to where the pistol was. Any amateur could see that this pistol couldn't be used anymore.

Looking closely, the items on the circumference around her continued to move about, creating a phenomenon similar to that of a tornado. A tornado caused by different items squeezing each other, ripping and destroying each other and forming debris.

It was useless to take something she couldn't use. Musujime impatiently tossed the pistol away. The safety of the pistol wasn't closed, thus, it exploded, the debris landing all over the place, but Musujime didn't mind.

The circular tornado surrounding Musujime suddenly stopped.

The items and debris that had continued to appear and vanish suddenly stopped and drop onto the ground.

"I'm going to kill you…"

Musujime growled.

Sweat continued to roll down her chest like fat forced out of barbequed meat by intense heat.

"I must kill you! I will definitely not forgive you!! You dare to destroy my everything!! Without you, my life wouldn't be so pitiful!!"

Those outrageous and angry words made Shirai, who was lying on the floor, laugh weakly.



Musujime gave a sinister look at Shirai, like she wanted to suffocate Shirai with her own two hands. However, she suddenly looked up.

“Ha… hahaha! Isn’t this too coincidental, Shirai-san?”

The sound of a police car could be heard. It seemed like Anti-Skill had been alerted by the commotion.

“But I’m not going to let this little obstacle obstruct me! I’m going to kill you! Even if you’re far away, I can end your life. I’m different from you; I’m special!!”

Musujime slackened her jaw, staggering as she stood up,

“…The trainers told me that I’ll damage my body if I move anything more than a thousand kilograms, but I don’t care anymore. The maximum limit of my Move Point is 4,520 kilograms. I can escape and attack this place. I can destroy this place with you in it.” Musujime continued in a low voice, “Hohoho, I’m going to destroy you. Since you destroyed me, I definitely want revenge. I wonder how your body will end up after the building collapses on you, eh, Shirai-san?”

On hearing Musujime’s words, Shirai didn’t say anything. She could only look at the ceiling like a corpse.

Musujime spit onto the floor and looked around, picking up the one-sleeve jacket. She put it on and looked for the luggage bag with the broken handle.

“Ah… you still need such a thing?”

“!”

On hearing those words, Musujime turned around and saw Shirai Kuroko smiling at her.

Even when her body was devastated, Shirai’s will didn’t allow her to give up. Her lips curled up, revealing a sarcastic smile.

Musujime gave a hard kick to Shirai’s abdomen. Shirai rolled back onto the ground, blood spurting out. However, Musujime’s eyes were bloodshot as she ignored Shirai, turning and grabbing the luggage bag. Right now, Musujime’s aims and methods were no longer in sync. The outcome of the situation and the plans for the future were no longer important to her.

With a distorted look, Musujime carried the luggage bag and disappeared into thin air.

In contrast, Shirai Kuroko was unable to use her teleportation.

If she stayed, she would be attacked by Musujime.

A maximum limit of 4,520 kilograms.

If she exerted full power, Musujime's body would be damaged as well. But she didn't care. She would rather endure some pain and destroy the entire level together with Shirai's body. No, not just the level. If the level collapsed, the domino effect would cause the entire building to collapse completely.

She had to run away.

Even a stupid person could understand that. However, Shirai couldn't even move a finger.

(Onee… sama…)

This soft voice escaped the girl's lips.

But that heartfelt thought was ruthlessly blocked by the long distance.

Part 3

The entire restaurant was a mess. The glass windows were shattered, and all the neatly arranged tables were flipped about. The menus had been stepped on by the escaping customers, and broken plates were all over the place. Blood was scattered all over the floor, and there was even an injured girl lying there. All the customers and staff members had disappeared, and only bright lights and unsuitable light French music echoed throughout the room. Because the windows were broken, the air-conditioning had already lost its effect.

"…Ugh…"

Shirai Kuroko, who was covered in blood and lying on the floor, tried to move her fingers. Her fingers twitched slightly, but that was her limit. She couldn't move her wrists nor her legs. She couldn't stand up and leave this place through the use of her two legs; even crawling out was impossible for her. Her mind was in a whirl; she couldn't use her teleportation.

Shirai thought that all she could do was wait there and die.

Musujime Awaki had already left. However, she was probably not too far away. While escaping by teleporting using Move Point, the displacement and time wasn't important, because Move Point could ignore any obstacles like roads and walls, thus the main point was how to hide her whereabouts.

Also, Musujime had a huge fear about teleporting herself.

In order to decrease the number of times she needed to teleport herself, she would carefully calculate every single spot that she was going to teleport to. Thus, right now, she might have been hiding somewhere and thinking, planning the safest escape route.

Before she left, Musujime had announced that she would definitely kill Shirai Kuroko. She would definitely use all her strength and move a 4,520 kilogram mass to squash a dying Shirai to death.

Shirai didn't know when she would take action.

It may be five seconds later, or may be five minutes later. It couldn't be five hours later or five days later though.

Anyway, if she didn't run away, she would definitely be dead.

(This… is terrible…)

Blood-stained hair was stuck to her face, and some of it even got into her mouth.

(This is too ugly… I got let off the hook by an enemy who didn't kill me… and ended up provoking her, forcing her to lose control of her powers… looks like Shirai Kuroko will have to bow down and apologize to a lot of people now…)

The first person that she wanted to bow down and apologize to was a certain girl.

Misaka Mikoto.

Shirai wasn't a childhood friend of Misaka Mikoto, and their parents didn't really have some sort of intimate relationship. Shirai had only met Mikoto after she entered Tokiwadai Middle School… which was after April of this year.

Also, both of them hadn't meet deliberately, they had just so happened to meet each other in the same school, in the same building.

However, Shirai had learned a lot of things from Mikoto.

Though they would only meet each other occasionally in school, it had been enough to change Shirai.

What Shirai had learned from Mikoto was just some basic stuff.

Mannerism wasn't about decorating yourself, but to make the other person comfortable.

Courtesy shouldn't be forced on others, but to be used as a guide.

Helping others wasn't a form of pride, but was to listen to the other person's problems.

Dignity couldn't be used to protect alone, it could only be obtained after protecting others.

Mikoto didn't nag at Shirai regarding all that.

But she acted as a role model.

That made Shirai feel very tiny. Though Mikoto's actions looked rather crude, they were still based on some basic concepts, though they weren't very formal. Even in street fighting, Mikoto would not break any fighting rules, a so-called "battle etiquette". Up until then, Shirai still felt that her Onee-sama was of a completely different level from her, who only knew how to act it out without understanding the meaning behind it.

If it was her…

If it was Misaka Mikoto, she would definitely not make that mistake.

Shirai was rather confident of that. Though that was the thought of an arrogant, wishful and self-righteous outsider, Shirai still believed it. If it was the Railgun, she wouldn't mind the danger level. She would smile and rush into the battlefield, not give the enemy any time to take a breather, suppress the enemy immediately and leave without a scratch.

To her, Shirai's current condition wasn't much.

No matter how bad the situation was, she would not back away.

She would run to Shirai, carry the extremely tired Shirai, say some encouraging words and rush out of the building at the last minute.

She would probably save that stupid kouhai of hers who was lying there.

Shirai Kuroko was thinking of Misaka Mikoto's name and face.

After that, she smiled.

(Though Onee-sama is perfect, this expectation may be a bit too much.)

Just as Shirai was mocking herself, the area started to make a cracking sound, like glass being pressed together. It's coming… Shirai weakly thought. Though there was no such phenomenon with teleportation and Move Point, Shirai knew.

It seemed that in ten seconds time, a mass of 4,520 kilograms would pass through space and hit her.

From outside the broken windows, the noises of car engines echoed throughout like never before, but the room was engulfed in terrifying silence. The difference in the two

sides was huge, and made Shirai want to laugh. Though she couldn't hear the unsuitable light French music echoing in the background, that created a chilly feeling even more.

(I don't want to die.)

At the same time, she knew that Misaka Mikoto couldn't hear her, yet Shirai couldn't help but continue to plead inside her heart.

Being extremely expectant that the Railgun might hear the commotion and run over.

(I beg of you…)

Shirai was unable to move her body on her own.

But if someone was supporting her, she might be able to walk.

If at that moment, there was a savior.

If someone could appear at the last minute like an old-school hero…

(I beg of you…)

The twin-pigtailed girl continued to hope.

At this final moment that would end.

(Please run away… don't get involved in this… Onee-sama…)

Shirai Kuroko earnestly wished.

Musujime Awaki's attack would immediately come, and she wouldn't be able to escape. At that moment, even if someone did come up, it was unlikely that she would be saved. If Mikoto arrived at the scene and saw her lying on the floor, she would rush over without any hesitation. Mikoto didn't even know that the attack that would pass through space would arrive soon, and even if she sensed the attack through extremely sharp alertness, she probably wouldn't be able to make it if she wanted to carry Shirai out of the building. The worst case scenario was that both of them would be crushed to death by the collapsing building, and the possibility of it was rather high.

Just…

Just…

(Ahh…)

Shirai heard something…

Footsteps could be heard from the entrance of the level where there was no one. Maybe they felt that the elevator was too slow, so they dashed up the stairs.

No, not just footsteps.

There was also sparks of electricity.

(Ahh… Nooo!!)

Shirai's face instantly turned pale.

Though she wanted to stop the owner of those footsteps, she couldn't move.

Thus, Shirai could only shout, "No, don't come here!!"

Right now, the savior who was coming over to save her at that perfect moment touched Shirai so much that she was about to cry. She desperately worked her throat, inducing every last ounce of strength to squeeze out her voice.

"There's going to be a spatial attack here! Don't come here! Hurry up and leave! The whole building will collapse!!"

Shirai Kuroko continued to scream while she was on the floor, covered in blood.

The area around her started to give out a cackling sound. Maybe the full attack was about to arrive, or maybe it was just a deliberate way of hinting.

"…!"

Shirai felt extremely anxious. Since she had teleported into the shop in the first place, she didn't know the layout and passageways of the building. However, from the sound, it seemed that the owner of the footsteps would require more than ten more seconds to get there. Though the displacement was short, it would take a long time to get around the lifts and passages, so the person most likely wouldn't make it in time.

Shirai didn't know what Musujime would teleport over.

But a 4,520 kilogram object—once it pressed onto the ground, it would cause the floor and the entire building to collapse. The people inside the building would definitely meet their end.

She couldn't let that happen.

She definitely couldn't let that happen.

"Runnnnnnnn…!!"

Shirai was about to break down in tears. Even until the last moment, she wanted to cry out, but it was too late. At that moment, the space inside the room started to distort, like she was seeing it through convex lenses. Maybe the space was forced apart, changing the air pressure on the level, causing a refraction of light and creating this phenomenon.

The attack was starting.

"…!"

Shirai gritted her teeth and exerted all her strength.

However, she still couldn't move her limbs. Not even a finger could move. Shirai Kuroko was really upset. If she had even more power, she would have used her teleportation easily and teleported the person who was coming in to save her at the same time. Besides, if she could have beaten Musujime Awaki, she wouldn't have be stuck in that crisis.

But no matter how upset she may have been, her power wasn't going to increase.

The reality was cruel.

(Onee… sama…!)

Though Shirai Kuroko was just barely hanging on, she still tried to squeeze out a last ounce of strength. She knew that it would aggravate her injuries, and that it wouldn't help to change the situation one bit, she still wouldn't allow herself to relax and give up. At the same time, she was making a final wish.

She wished that there was a miracle where that powerful yet ordinary girl would be saved.

A loud noise erupted.

The wish seemed to have worked. An orange light passed through the floor and the ceiling.

A shot of metal at three times the speed of sound.

The slanted heated beam passed through the level like a needle, with a speed so fast that a human couldn't sense it. Like a laser, neither the start nor the end could be seen, only a straight line could be seen. The terrifying speed even left a residual image behind.

Shirai was stunned as she saw that.

After that, there was a rumbling sound as the entire building shook. The orange line was like a fuse, creating an extraordinary destructive storm. A large blowhole two meters in diameter opened up as everything in the line was blown apart, away or completely

destroyed. The floor seemed to be tilted downwards as the sound of rubble falling could be heard.

The Railgun.

Shirai, who was on the ground, remembered that power and the name of the person who had that power.

“We’ll make it now that we have a hole to access through.”

Shirai heard the familiar voice of the girl.

Without anxiety, without fear, without hesitation, the words were filled with confidence, as if the person didn’t care about the danger.

“Though I’m unhappy about this, I can only work up till here. After this, we can only rely on your fist to bring her back!”

On hearing that, Shirai was shocked.

She inadvertently turned around.

The blowhole created by the Railgun was like a tunnel through the concrete floor. The debris of the ceiling and the tables, chairs and umbrellas were attracted by magnetism, sticking together through the slanted blowhole to form a ladder. A boy was running up that flight of stairs.

They wouldn’t have been able to make it if they had ran up the original staircase.

If so, they should just ignore those stairs.

The boy who was running up the most ridiculous shortcut ever conceived wasn’t holding any weapons. He didn’t look like he had any amazing ability. However, he continued to dash up without any fear. He clenched his right fist as hard as rock as he headed towards the obviously abnormal space.

The distortion of the space reached its maximum less than a second later, cracking from inside.

At that moment, the boy swung his fist without any hesitation.

The abnormality seemed to be some sort of illusion. Though Musujime’s attack was powerful, it didn’t bring the sense of reality.

A mass of 4,520 kilograms.

The boy’s fist formed a terrifying hammer as it slammed at the huge mass.

The boy's fist hit the middle.

The boy gritted his teeth. His fist ignored the change in space as it moved forward.

An amazing thing happened.

Suddenly, a sound of steel being hit could be heard. The originally distorted space seemed to be flattened by the boy's fist. The invisible thing that refracted the light seemed like it had been punched far away.

For a three-dimensional object to do a forced intervention on the eleventh-dimension spatial axis; Shirai, who had mastered those calculations, understood very well that that was like driving up the wrong way on a one-way road.

The ridiculous scene stunned Shirai.

The boy said, "Ah… we're a bit late. Sorry. I'm really clueless this time, running around like a headless chicken. Luckily, I met Mikoto on the way—Wah! Whoa whoa, aren't you in a terrible shape!?"

The boy only now seemed to realize that Shirai was severely injured, and immediately ran over.

"Why would you… risk your life for me…?" Shirai murmured.

The one who repaired the distortion with an amazing ability, it shouldn't be the person in front of her.

Thus, Shirai asked, "Don't we have no relation? No matter how powerful you are, you shouldn't have sold your life for me. Why would you run over without any hesitation?"

On hearing that, the boy just remained stunned for a while.

After that, he said, "You're asking me why? I don't know how to reply to that. Basically, it's easier to settle the problem head on than to run away. To be honest, if you could have been saved even if I ran away, I would have run away."

"It isn't… so simple, right…? Don't tell me you… aren't afraid at all?"

Shirai's words didn't change the boy's thoughts by a bit.

The boy replied without hesitation.

"About this, I would be afraid. But this is a promise."

"A promise?" Shirai asked.

The boy looked around, seemingly trying to confirm that no one was around.

After that, he lowered his voice and whispered, "...That's right, it's a promise. This promise is to protect Misaka Mikoto and the world around her. This is my agreement with a certain nameless person who fell in love with her so quickly."

The boy bitterly laughed.

"Maybe it's a bit too late, but I want to ask you something. Have I fulfilled the promise with that guy?"

Shirai didn't understand what the boy meant. After thinking for a while, she looked around.

Shirai's eyes focused on one point.

Misaka Mikoto. The Railgun, that Ace of Tokiwadai who was running over there through the huge blowhole that she had made to the thoroughly injured kouhai of hers with a teary look on her face.

Right now, the person that Shirai Kuroko wanted to protect the most was right in front of her.

"...That's right, you protected it. Halfway," Shirai replied.

The other half was now carrying a luggage bag and escaping through Move Point.

"Really?"

The boy seemed to realize something from Shirai's words, and didn't question it. He just nodded his head firmly.

After that, he said, "Then, I'll go and finish off the other half."

Between the Lines 4

Musujime Awaki had already arrived at the boundary of Academy City by moving through the safe escape route.

She was covered in wounds, and she was wearing a one-sleeved winter jacket over her naked upper body. Her jacket was buttoned wrongly, but she didn't know it. Overuse of her ability caused the blood vessels to appear all over her skin, hot and heavy breathing coming out of her mouth. She continued to look around, seemingly not knowing what to do next. She continued to murmur to herself as sweat flowed down her face due to

nervousness. Ever since she had lost her military flashlight, her powers had become hard to control. The fingers that were used to holding the military flashlight were now stained in blood as they stroked the luggage bag with a missing handle.

A terrifying memory appeared in her mind.

That was the after-effect of teleporting herself using her own power. She remembered that incident during class two years ago. At that time, the test had been simple—to teleport herself to a room in town. But Musujime had miscalculated the coordinates, and got a leg stuck inside a wall.

At first, there was no pain.

Thus, Musujime didn't really mind it. She tugged her leg out, trying to get away from the wall. However, that was the greatest error.

At that moment, she heard a cracking sound.

The rough texture on the broken part of the wall was rubbing against the skin on her leg.

After that, there was a sharp pain.

The leg pulled out of the wall had no skin at all.

Like…

Like a peeled orange. The tender flesh and the net-like blood vessels covering it were completely exposed.

(Kyaaaaaaaaaaahhhhh…!!)

Musujime Awaki keeled over. A sense of puking was rising up her abdomen as she tried to suppress it. Her back trembled irregularly, and after she felt the sense of vomiting, her stumbling feet completely stopped.

The urge to puke gradually disappeared.

But once her feet stopped, she couldn't step out any further.

(What… now…?)

Musujime Awaki was already unclear about how many times she had asked that question.

Her broken heart had completely lost its goal, and was now sunk in messy thoughts. In order to stick the pieces of her heart together again, she could only find a goal randomly. The first thing that entered her eyes was still the luggage bag. Though she couldn't

remember why she needed the thing in the first place, she just had to hand it over to the external organization. The goal wasn't there, but she was still idling about in her means.

(Got to contact…)

Musujime pulled out a radio receiver.

(Got to contact them… contact… contact… this is necessary… hahaha… I haven't ruined this plan that everyone thought is important…)

On the other end of the receiver, the partner's familiar voice could be heard. Musujime revealed a childish-like smile and proceeded with the call.

"This is A001 calling M000. I'll report the current situation after confirming the code…"

Musujime followed the call protocol that she had memorized and gave the message. However, a sharp sound came from the other side of the receiver. Musujime couldn't help but pull the radio to her ear and listen carefully. Gunfire, roars and screams came from the other end of the receiver. Such a reply was completely against what the protocol dictated and irritated Musujime.

"This is A001 calling M000. This is A001 calling M000. This is… you should be able to hear it, right? Why aren't you answering!?"

With Musujime's roar, a cracking sound came from the receiver. Musujime was overexcited and nearly crushed the radio receiver. A man's terrible wail came from the other end of the receiver; it sounded like the leader of the external organization.

After that, the gunfire immediately ceased.

Besides the man's painful cries, a woman's low voice could be heard,

"To trick those children into selling their own lives for your own benefit, and yet you're hiding in a safe place to watch the show, such a wonderful job, huh? Though my policy is not to use my weapon on any children, I won't hesitate if it's for them."

The screams and gunfire rang at the same time.

After that, the other end of the radio receiver became silent.

"You think I'll kill you so easily!? Idiot! How did you trick those children, and how many of them!? Spill it out!! How am I going to save those children!?"

After that, only a shrill sound could be heard from the radio receiver. No matter how Musujime pressed the buttons, no matter how she adjusted the signal, she couldn't hear a decent reply. Right now, nobody needed to contact Musujime anymore.

(Ah… ah… contact… got to contact… I got to get contact! How could this happen? If… if I lose my goal… what should I do…!?)

No matter how she shook and slammed on the radio receiver, she couldn't get any reply. Musujime was unable to endure the silence and roared, smashing the radio on the ground. The tiny parts scattered all over the place and the noise completely vanished. With that, the actual noise was no more. Musujime Awaki looked like she was about to cry.

Right now, Musujime Awaki couldn't return to Academy City. To the board chairman of Academy City, the Tree Diagram wasn't very important. On the contrary, if the experiment was restarted, it would obstruct the plan to use the Sisters. If so, not only Academy City, not only the science side, the balance of the entire "world" would be affected. Of course, Musujime wasn't clear on what the "world" was.

(What to do…what to do… shouldn't I contact that external organization…? Or should I try and contact other organizations? There should be a lot of those organizations that want this thing… yeah, that's right. I still have… I still have many things to do! A goal… as long as I have a goal, I'm not finished yet!)

Musujime carried a distorted smile as she wore a shirt that looked like a torn rag, pushing the luggage bag as she moved on.

However, someone was blocking her.

Musujime heard footsteps in front of her.

There was a wide road in front of Musujime, with buildings on both sides. As it was near the edge of Academy City, there were usually very few vehicles on the road, and right now, there was not even a single car around. The entire road was like a plane's runway. At that moment, a person walked over from the side of the road.

Musujime didn't care who the person was.

She just felt irritated, not even caring enough to guard herself as she moved forward. She made up her mind, no matter who the person was, she would let any person who dared to obstruct her die extremely painfully and ugly.

That person walked up to the middle of the two-way six-lane wide road and stopped, blocking Musujime.

That person…

"What the hell!?"

Had a crazy, psychotic, and dirty pale look.



“I heard that brat say that she got lots of information through the clone network, and found that there was something troubling that heavily involves them. On hearing that, I can only reluctantly help her settle this. I struggled so hard to use the crutch as support, and got the electricity into my brain, and finally made it here with so much difficulty. How did it end up like this? Also, what the hell is this one-of-its-kind collar-type electrode connector? That damn doctor, to think that he made me use this prototype that was made at the last second!”

Weird electrodes were stuck on his forehead, temples and neck, while his right hand was holding a crutch. The crutch had a rather modernistic design, a long stick with a handle attached to it. It looked a bit like an “iron-crutch” in those old martial arts shows.

“Anyway, I worked so hard to get here, only to see the idiot who made me work so hard. I was so expectant… only to see that it’s third-rate shit like you!? You looked down on me, didn’t you? If I had known that my opponent would be a third-rate thing like you, I would have be too lazy to get out! You’re really making it troublesome for me!!”

The person standing in the darkness was the strongest Level 5 in Academy City.

Skin that was so pale it was terrifying, that it could be seen clearly even in the darkness. Though his real name was unknown, he was called Accelerator.

“Ugh… ah…!!”

With a glance at him, Musujime’s breathing and heartbeat stopped for an instant.

(This… this guy—)

Musujime Awaki’s lungs wriggled about in a weird manner. Her mind was in chaos, not even sure whether she should inhale or exhale.

(—This guy is…! This… this is bad! Not… not even the Railgun can beat him… how can I take him on…!?)

Musujime, who had worked hard to pursue her goal, had now found a goal that was more important than handing the luggage bag over, a clear goal that was enough to change her own fate.

(…Got… got to find a way… find a way to escape…!)

The person standing in the middle of the road that was as wide as a plane runway forced Musujime to make a decision. She had to run away.

However, there was another huge problem? How?

Accelerator was just complaining about how in that situation, he met Musujime Awaki. But now, Musujime Awaki was thinking that she should be the one saying that.

The difference in power was too great. Why did such a terrifying person have to be called in to settle a dispute with between espers with an insignificant power? The difference in scale was like mobilizing an air strike and destroying a country to stop children from fighting each other.

Musujime's thoughts were rather messy.

It was not enough to even use "an ordinary person versus a professional athlete" to describe the difference in power. If there was a need to drive the point home, it was like a tug-of-war match between a human and a jet. It was not a question of who would win or lose. The jet could just not do anything and the human couldn't even move it by a single centimeter.

It was over.

Everything was over.

Musujime's expression was distorted due to despair.

At that moment…

"…I got it."

Like a crumpled piece of paper being unraveled, Musujime's face regained its original look.

"I got it! That's right, you lost your calculation ability! You lost your power! Completely! You're not the strongest esper anymore!!"

Musujime cheered like a victor.

Accelerator, who was standing in the darkness, was slightly shocked, and calmly said, "What a pity."

He paused, waiting for a breeze to pass through.

"If you really think so, that's too bad, I really want to hug you."

"Haha! Stop faking it! I'm always with 'that person'! I'm well informed about inside news in academy city. Accelerator, you lost your ability on August 31st, so you're not 'Accelerator' anymore, right!? If so, why are you just standing there? Why aren't you attacking me? It's not that you don't want to attack, you can't attack, right? You're just trying to scare me with that past reputation of yours, right?"

Musujime loudly proclaimed in a mocking tone, but the white figure just narrowed his eyes.

Musujime felt that she was being looked down on, some muscles below her eye inadvertently shudder.

"…! Why aren't you saying anything!? This really makes me uncomfortable!!"

Musujime roared, but at the same time, she felt that something was not right.

It didn't seem right. That person seemed different from the characteristics given in the data of that Level 5.

"You're really pitiful. Listen, I'll tell you one thing." The figure in the darkness slowly opened his arms wide. "That day, my brain was damaged alright. Looking at me now, you should know, right? That I can only use the electrode and let the calculation work be done by others, right? If I enter a place where I can't receive the clones' electrowaves, I can't let the clones do the calculation work for me. And even after therapy, I don't know if my recovered power is half of what I originally had. The battery of this thing can only allow me to fight for fifteen minutes—"

Talking up to that point, Accelerator paused for a while.

"—But then again, *just because I've gotten weaker, doesn't mean that you've gotten stronger, right!?"*

Accelerator revealed a distorted smile.

Using the feet that were supporting him on the ground, he stomped hard on it.

A shockwave from below to above happened on the hard surface. Accelerator bent his body, and with his feet at the center, a radial crack appeared in the asphalt ground, and noise was created from all the buildings around. The skeletal frames of the buildings were bent, a large number of glass windows were shattered, and pieces of broken glass came down like a torrential rain.

(This is—impossible…!)

Musujime looked up at the sky. The "rain" formed by the broken pieces of glass came from all the buildings, scattering on every corner of the road. As the area was too big, she couldn't escape using Move Point. Escaping into the buildings wasn't a wise option as it was the distortion of the building structures that had caused all the glass to be shattered, so the interior wouldn't be the same. If the target of Move Point overlapped with the collapsed wall, she would be buried.

(If so… the only way out… is up!)

Musujime grabbed the luggage bag and quickly used Move Point, passing through the rain of glass pieces, arriving in the night sky several meters above the ground. Move Point caused a sense of vomiting in Musujime as she tried to suppress that feeling. She tried to force herself to activate Move Point again before she landed; the target was onto the roof of a certain building. Moving her own body consecutively was an extremely tough challenge for her.

But at that moment, Musujime's mind turned blank. All the values that she had worked so hard to calculate vanish without a trace.

"Ha ha! Thank you for letting me enjoy the scenery underneath your skirt!!"

Accelerator crushed the cracked asphalt road even further, shooting up into the night sky like a rocket. Besides changing the vector forces on his feet, four high-powered tornadoes were attached to his back.

In Musujime's eyes, Accelerator was an angel rushing towards the sky.

One that had fallen into that mundane world, a thoroughly tainted angel, launching a counterattack at the wonderland in the sky.

Accelerator rushed into the layers of glass rain, deflecting them all and passing through them easily. He was completely unscathed, rushing over at Musujime Awaki at the speed of a cannon.

He clenched his fist.

Actually, the tonfa-shaped cane was broken into several pieces, flying in the sky. The fist that was like a devil carried the entire speed and force of his body, slamming towards Musujime's face.

".....!?!?"

In that situation, calmness was a luxury.

Musujime, who had given up on the calculations, immediately used the luggage bag as a shield. However, that negligible defense was broken to pieces instantly once Accelerator's iron fist slammed it. The exterior of the luggage bag was smashed to pieces, the middle layer that was meant to endure impact was flying all over the place, and the 'content' that was tightly sealed became numerous parts and pieces, flying all around from Musujime's hands like sakura petals.

"I'm sorry, from here on now, the path is only a one-way road!!"[1] The esper curled his lips and smiled. "You can't advance, just hide behind your tail and cry your way home!"

[1] In Kanji, Accelerator is written as Ippō Tsūkō, or 'One-Way Road'

Musujime's throat released a weird sound.

The hard fist pierced through the luggage bag at a terrifying speed and smashed her face.

Musujime Awaki's body was sent flying away diagonally to an even higher place, landing on a safety metal net on the edge of the roof of a building. The numerous pillars supporting the metal net were uprooted, as Musujime's body was like a soccer ball that hit the back of the net, unable to move forward anymore.

Accelerator, who had released all the force from his body, didn't do anything. Due to the effect of gravity, he started to fall down to the ground covered in darkness.

But his eyes weren't looking at the ground.

As he descended, he slowly looked up at Musujime, who had slammed into the roof, muttering, "With this pitiful state of mine, I might not have the right to be called the strongest in Academy City."

He silently narrowed his eyes.

"However, I've already made up my mind. I'll always be the strongest in front of that brat, damn it."

Those words echoed throughout the night wind as nobody listened to it. Accelerator continued to descend toward the ground.

EPILOGUE

Every Single Day.

One_Place,One_Scene.

The next morning, Kamijou Touma requested leave for a few hours from school and came to a certain hospital. But this time, he was really not injured, so he came to the hospital not for treatment, but to visit Shirai Kuroko.

However, he was just standing down there blankly. He was standing at a recreational room not far away from the hospital rooms, which also functioned as a smoking area. There was even a vending machine beside the wall. There was a bright red hand imprint on his face. That was because when he had walked into her hospital room, Shirai had been changing her clothes.

After being chased out of the hospital room, Kamijou guessed that it might take some time for girls to change clothes, so he decided to bring an angry Index to visit Misaka Imouto, who was in the same hospital.

Misaka Imouto had already changed rooms. The amount of activity that she had done seemed to have caused a huge amount of damage to her health, especially since she had not recovered properly. Right now, Misaka Imouto was floating in an oval cylinder filled completely with transparent liquid. It was impossible to see that sort of hardened glass container that had sci-fi characteristics in an ordinary hospital.

Though Misaka Imouto was inside the container, she was still conscious. On seeing Kamijou, she nodded her head expressionlessly. However, Misaka Imouto was not wearing anything except for eight white electrodes. Thus, a raging Index bit the back of Kamijou's head viciously. (Though Misaka Imouto herself didn't mind at all.)

How tragic was that bite attack? In this hospital room, there was a pet cage (this cage was specially designed such that animal fur and germs couldn't enter). Even the black cat in the cage had its animal instincts awakened on seeing that, completely terrified, jumping around as if there was an earthquake. This morning, Kamijou was really unlucky.

In other words...

Twice, Kamijou and Index had left the hospital rooms as if they were fleeing from a disaster, back to that recreational area.

"…Such misfortune. A normally unlucky Kamijou-san seems to be entering an 'unlucky mayhem' (change in probability)! I won't be surprised even if I'm to meet misfortune nine times consecutively, damn it!!"

Touching the wall, Kamijou gave a tired expression as he stood up, his hand holding a paper bag. There was a black honeydew fruit jelly inside that was worth 1,400 yen (So expensive, yet it's not any bigger). He was wary that Index might bite and tear off the paper bag at any time, but felt that no matter how gluttonous Index was, she wouldn't lay hands on gifts that were meant for patients. However, he was still unable to relax.

However, to Index, the lottery wheel of the vending machine seemed much more interesting than the fruit jelly.

Index noticed the machine and said, "What's that Tree Diagram and Remnant? I don't really understand. I only know that Touma said such a cool line 'Then, I'll go and finish off the other half,' and didn't do anything after that…"

"Ugh… I followed the predicted route that Shirai give me, saw that all the windows of the buildings were shattered, and what looked like broken pieces of a luggage bag were scattered all over the place, including what's inside. There was even a devastated girl hanging up at the roof… Seems like some mysterious person helped out."

"Touma, Touma. I hardly get the chance to say this to you… you big eater!!"

"Hey! I knew you'd call me that, damn it!! Who's the guy who stole my credit and left so silently!! Is he trying to act cool!?"

"…That's right, for someone like Touma, one is too many."

"Nooo!!" the voice echoed throughout the morning hospital.

♦

"So noisy, who's the idiot who's making such a ruckus outside?"

The noise that passed through the wall made Accelerator frown. Though the voice seemed familiar, maybe he was just worrying too much, Accelerator wondered. That single bed room wasn't wide, but besides the bed, there didn't seem to be anything. Accelerator lay on the bed, covering himself with the blanket again. Though his hair was growing extremely fast, and his wounds were healing abnormally fast, and he could even jump and play around, one had to remember that he was a critically injured patient. If it was an ordinary person, they probably wouldn't even be able to stand up. A rectangular table was horizontally placed above the patient's bed like an overhead bridge.

The table was meant for the patient to have his meals. However, there was a seemingly ten-year-old girl lying on the table, shaking her legs about. That girl used to be covered in a towel, but right now, she was wearing a light blue cutie dress from some children's fashion brand. It was one of the clothes that the lady in sports attire had given her.

"I heard from Yomikawa that her job last night was to go 'outside' and destroy an external organization called the Asociacion de Cienia, says Misaka as Misaka reports all the information that she heard from the Misaka Network. That network had interacted with Amai Ao before, so they're rather familiar with the Tree Diagram, says Misaka as Misaka describes with this sudden feeling."

"That so…"

"Yomikawa came back with black rings around her eyes; seems like she didn't sleep at all, says Misaka as Misaka is sympathizing her regarding the age shown by her skin. …Eh? Why do you look so dead, completely different from usual? asks Misaka as Misaka is really curious."

"…I came back early in the morning. Now, I just want to sleep; tell me what you want to say later."

"Ah—! It'll be bad once you start sleeping!! says Misaka as Misaka changes into Misaka alarm clock mode!! It's daytime! It's two hours till noon! says Misaka as Misaka kicks while she fawns, trying to re-motivate your mind that is about to sleep!"

"…"

(This brat, did she experience something bad while I was sleeping?)

Accelerator suspiciously considered that as he pulled the blanket and covered his ears. Though he just needed to use the electrode and let the Misaka Network handle the calculations for him to use his powers, the Misaka Network would normally be in charge of the bare minimum of handling language, calculation and reflecting ultraviolet rays. Besides, he couldn't just waste the battery power so carelessly.

"Damn it, I really envy this kid. I was under the condition that my brain's about to blow, worked so hard to leave the hospital, and came back in the morning. This brat can lie about in the air-con room and enjoy the benefits…! Sob removbing my speech stoit!!"

Halfway through talking, Accelerator was suddenly unable to speak coherently, and started to roar and rage.

Actually, the Misaka Network had stopped the calculations for Accelerator's speech ability.

Accelerator wanted to say “Don’t just remove my speech ability”.

“Misaka doesn’t want to help do the calculations for those who don’t listen, says Misaka as Misaka tries to protest in a cutesy manner—Wahh! Why are you wrapping Misaka’s body in a blanket!? says Misaka as Misaka suddenly starts to worry about her personal safety!!”

♦

On the other hand, in the other single bed room.

“Come on, come on! Comeoncomeoncomeoncomeon!! Onee-sama!! The wonderful moment for you to cut the apple into a rabbit has finally come! Oh hohohohoho…!!”

“You’re really noisy! Kuroko! Why were you on the brink of death yesterday, only to be up and jumping… Wait a sec! You’re still tired, but through some form of willpower, you wanted to get off the bed, right? Hey, stop it, Kuroko!! You’ll really lose your life!!!”

Covered in wounds, Shirai Kuroko smiled as she tried to leap on her beloved Onee-sama. Misaka Mikoto desperately forced her back onto the bed and covered her with the blanket.

“Ahh… being pushed back onto the bed like this, this feeling… it’s… it’s worth it to fight against the enemy so close up! The world looks so bright now!!”

“Don’t you know what it means to rest quietly?”

“If you want Kuroko to rest well, then give Kuroko an apple rabbit! That gentleman who came over probably likes girls who are more domesticated. Right?”

“…R-really? Kuroko, you think so?”

“I’m just saying it randomly; why must Onee-sama be so serious about it? Don’t tell me that that guy who came in when I was changing clothes is really the one Onee-sama likes? That… that damn—!?”

To be able to jump about like that even after she had been severely injured, Mikoto was really amazed at Kuroko’s vitality. During that clothes changing moment, Mikoto had helped Kuroko, who was unable to move well, give a slap to a certain boy (with a suitable amount of electricity in the blow as well), and now she seemed rather remorseful about it. The news that Musujime Awaki got retained at Kirigaoka Girls Academy didn’t concern her as well.

Suddenly, the conversation was interrupted.

Both of them remained silent.

The intense atmosphere was starting to cool.

They wanted to open up their closed mouths, but it was taking more effort than what they had expected.

Mikoto understood the reason.

Her kouhai had gotten injured, many parts of her body had been stabbed through.

In the end, Mikoto still got other people involved in her personal affair.

Besides the Sisters and that boy, there was the extremely naïve kouhai.

“I can understand…”

Shirai, who was on the bed, suddenly spoke up, interrupting Mikoto’s thoughts.

Stunned, Mikoto looked up. Shirai continued.

“I can understand that where Onee-sama stood was her battlefield. But with this ongoing chaos, I don’t understand what’s going on. Especially at the last moment, the situation when you all came over, it’s so ridiculous that it made me not think about it and not pursue the matter further.” Shirai carried a small smile as she relaxed her entire body. “The current me now is unable to stand on the same place as Onee-sama. I tried to catch up, only to end up here.”

“Kuroko…”

Mikoto revealed a painful expression.

But that expression was quickly covered by other expressions. Mikoto knew how to hide her emotions. However, because of that, she was even more fragile. Shirai understood that very clearly.

“Onee-sama, if you feel that you need to take responsibility for getting me involved in this, you’re wrong.”

“Eh?”

“My incompetence is my own responsibility, isn’t that obvious? What has this got to do with Onee-sama? Please don’t look down on me. I still know how to be responsible. If Onee-sama is to be responsible for me, my dignity would be gone.” Shirai Kuroko calmly said, “Thus, Onee-sama, smile. Look at this kouhai of yours who came back safety despite ruining the situation, give a thumbs up and laugh. With these happy memories as food, I can be re-motivated again.”

After that, Shirai added on in her heart.

(However, what I said only lasts for now. I, Shirai Kuroko, don't intend to stay at the same spot. So, Onee-sama, please wait for me. With a goal, Kuroko's speed will be extremely fast!)

Shirai understood how comfortable that place was, so she decided to go back to the battlefield.

In order not to let the girl in front of her realize that, she didn't say anything.

Just like that, Shirai Kuroko understood the limitations of her ability.

Just like that, Shirai Kuroko saw that world that she couldn't touch.

But because of that, she wouldn't give up, and would continue to pursue on.

She was not aiming to climb higher.

She just wanted to protect this sky now.

AFTERWORD

To the studious readers who read all the volumes one by one, it's been a while.

To the readers who bought all the books at one go, nice to meet you.

I'm Kamachi Kazuma.

It's the eighth volume. The theme this time is very simple—superpowers. This time, I actually made some changes to the story: Kamijou Touma would originally be the only boy character to appear in this story. Hearing this, you might be wondering about some things. However, please don't read too much into it. Besides, 'that role' can't be explained in a few words.

In this volume, some unresolved things from Volume 3 and 5 were mentioned. On first glance, this is completely unrelated to magic, but the antagonist, Musujime Awaki, has questions that I feel involve several factors related to magic.

Why do Misaka Mikoto and the Misaka Sisters have such a difference in power? Other than humans, is there really nothing that can observe and analyze the surroundings to create superpowers? Basically, what's the significance of observing and analyzing the phenomenon? Considering the storyline and protagonist viewpoint, I couldn't answer these questions in this volume, so I can only wait for another opportunity.

Haimura-san, who is in charge of illustrations, and Miki-san, who's in charge of printing. I'll like to thank both of you. Thanks to you two, this book can be on the shelves of bookstores.

I'll also like to thank the readers who bought these books. Thanks to you, this book is able to make its way onto your bookshelves.

I'm grateful that this book is still in a corner of your mind.

And I hope that the next volume won't be forgotten as well.

At this moment, let me sign off first.

...Misaka Mikoto. I thought that she would have more opportunities to appear in this volume.

-Kamachi Kazuma